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“MAN, WHO PARTS THE WINDBLOWN GRASSES,” AND OTHER STORIES

by

Ryan Kennerly

Bachelor of Science  
University of Iowa, 2005

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of Master of Fine Arts in

Creative Writing

College of Arts and Sciences

University of South Carolina

2014

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## DEDICATION

For Russell, the first of many reasons why I write.

## ABSTRACT

*“Man, who Parts the Windblown Grasses,” and Other Stories* is a collection of short fiction based on common themes of violence, loss and grief, and humanity’s struggle to reconcile the primal demands of the id with the desires and restrictions of the superego. Written from many different perspectives, representing all manner of walks of life, the collection seeks to question the ways in which violence is presented, defended, and understood, and what that means for humanity as a species.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

DEDICATION .....	iii
ABSTRACT .....	iv
CHAPTER 1: AUGUSTANA, ON WHOM THE RAIN FALLS .....	1
CHAPTER 2: DAVID, IN AND OF THE WORLD .....	12
CHAPTER 3: MICHAEL, WHOM I LAST HEARD DYING .....	19
CHAPTER 4: DEVIN, IN THE QUIET DARK .....	31
CHAPTER 5: KRAVITZ, VICTIM.....	39
CHAPTER 6: DESPAIR/DISCONTIGUOUS.....	59
CHAPTER 7: TIMOTHY, WHO DESTROYS.....	60
CHAPTER 8: VALHALLA .....	72
CHAPTER 9: JOE, FLYING LOW AND CIRCLING.....	77
CHAPTER 10: CLARENCE, BEHIND GLASS .....	87
CHAPTER 11: SUHA, ANIMA, DESAPARECIDA .....	106
CHAPTER 12: BRIAN, SARAH, BROKEN .....	110
CHAPTER 13: MAN, WHO PARTS THE WINDBLOWN GRASSES .....	122
CHAPTER 14: ZYRA, BORN AND DYING .....	127
CHAPTER 15: NATALIA, THE TEMPEST .....	138
CHAPTER 16: IN LIEU OF ABSENCE, FLESH .....	152
CHAPTER 17: MIKHI, QUESTION .....	155

## CHAPTER 1

### AUGUSTANA, ON WHOM THE RAIN FALLS

She loves the plains because she feels the wind there, undulating the fabric of her skirts, pulling on the edges of her sleeves like a supplicating child. Drawing her hair across her face, lifting the ends of it free from her shoulders to writhe and unfurl like living things gone beyond the touch of gravity. Whispering in the open of her ears, noiseless. She hears it in the thrumming of exposed skin raised into goosebumps. She knows to fear the slate-grey swell of clouds to the east, set against the unwashed linen sky, boiling; glowing white in their furrows as if stretched thin by the effort of holding back something glorious. The wind sweeps them closer, the wild grasses dancing beneath them, in their shadows.

Across the plain a group of men swarm over a half-completed railway bridge. Recognizable as men in their bustle, the repetitive brutality of their movements. Carrying railroad ties from stacks of wood twice higher than they are. Pounding the wood into the earth as though replanting it. Great hammers and great spikes. Spanning land and water. In idle time, clustering together, talking, planning.

At the first touch of cold she raises her hand to study the half-globe of rainwater between her first and second knuckles. The second touch falls on her nose, and she wipes the wet away just before the third alights on her forehead. Lightning glows, falters, dies. She feels the thunder in her heels. The wind picks up. The railway men disperse. She

leaves the hillside.

At the cabin the fire is gone low beside the cast-iron cookpot. She spreads the firelogs with a blackened poker, grabs another from the dwindled pile of firewood in the corner of the cabin's one room. She lifts the lid of the cookpot to tend to the stew, dwelling for a moment in the mingled scent of meat and plain spices. She warms by the fire. She swings open the door to watch the rain. She takes needle and thread from the sewing basket and busies herself with darning a tear in one of John's shirts. She passes time.

John passes by the open door, mounted on their horse, and she waits while he stables the animal, feeds it, waters it. When he comes in he is soaked through, beard dripping water on the floorboards, hair stuck to his head in thick strands, shirt dark and clinging to his angles. She stands to greet him, to tangle her fingers in the wet of his hair. He shakes his head to stop her.

His fingers, thick and calloused, struggle with the buttons of his shirt. She feels a flush rise upward from her hips, and wonders, somewhere in her mind, if the stew will overcook while they thrash at each other. But his movements are too slow, too careful, and his face pulls wide, as if in rictus. He abandons the unbuttoning halfway down and simply pulls the open shirt up over his head with his right arm while his left hangs limp. Her eyes settle on the span-long gash, drooling blood down the meat of his left ribs.

He sits beside her, in front of the fire.

She takes his castoff shirt, warms it by the fire until the rainwater in it is nearly steaming. She lifts his left arm and cleans away the dirt and stain along the torn skin at the edges of the wound, stopping as he tenses, pulls away, ribs drawing together. When



the cloth is cold and bloody she takes a different part of it, warms it again, and cleans inside the wound. When she finished she takes the upholstery needle from her sewing basket and ties the thread to it.

As best she can, she tells him: *Tell me if I hurt you.*

He mouths his words slowly, so she can read: *I'll be fine.*

She stitches quickly, holding the wound closed with one hand while the other pulls the blood-slick needle through, around, back, skin puckering after it. Her stitching follows the jagged line of the cut like an immortalization of it, a fixing in time and place of the moment when the piercing implement entered him, left him. When he is older she will kiss the scar she leaves, trace the raised skin with her fingertips.

He taps her shoulder. When she looks up his eyes are half-hidden in shadows cast by his lowbent brow and the uncertain firelight. He mouths: *that hurts.*

She nods. She takes her lips to the half-stitched wound and kisses it as forcefully as she thinks he will allow, and then she wipes the wet from her mouth with the back of her hand and sets again to the work of closing it.

After she finishes, after John has changed and his wet clothes hang in front of the fire -- to be washed, she reminds herself, as soon in the morning as she can wake -- as they sit by the fire and sip from bowls of overcooked stew, she attempts: *how did it happen?*

He shakes his head, then cocks it, listening, watching.

Again: *Your cut.* Pointing to his torso. *How did it happen?*

He frowns, mouths: *I don't understand.*

She taps the left side of her ribs, finger thudding against the bone, in the place

where John had been cut. *How?*

He shakes his head, mumbles something too quickly, too gently, for her to read.

That night John lies close to her in their bed. He smells of sweat and smoke and something hidden under earth. His breath on her neck is presence, warm, then fading, fading. His hands question at her waist, the crease of her hip. He whispers something in her ear, quick bursts of tickling breath, and she loves him for it.

While he is atop her she fears the tearing of a stitch every time she feels him tense or spasm; she wonders at his need for her, that he might endure the pain he must feel in each truncated thrust. She wishes she could take his place, wincing, thrusting, bleeding, as he lay beneath, shuddering in pleasure, each breath cut short by a gasp. In her final moment tensing her whole body, filling him, tiny pulsings in her hips. When he finishes he kisses her brow, her nose, her lips.

He sleeps with his arm around her, and she drapes hers over him. Breathing into him. Staring out the rough glass window, watching the water course down in waves.

It rains again in the morning. She would fear the leaking of the roof if John had not chinked it together himself, tarred it twice with pitch. The day is too wet for work, and John can barely swing his left arm. He insists on going into town regardless. There is time enough before he leaves to build a fire and cook a simple breakfast of millet. Afterward she helps him into his oilskin and hat, brushing her fingers down his shoulders, turning down his hatbrim so the water falls from it cleanly. When he rides off his left arm hangs limp in the saddle and he holds the reins tightly with his right hand, so he cannot

wave goodbye. He recedes behind great sheets of rain.

She would leave the washing until the rain breaks, but the blood in John's shirt has already set too long and he has few others. She lacks a hat or slicker of her own, and her only pair of boots is split at the toe. She walks barefoot to the creek, clad in a simple dress, wet through before she's gone twenty paces. The ground is soft; it rises between her toes, and sucks at her heels. The creek is several feet beyond its banks, churning muddy water in a channel without defined bounds. She hikes her skirts up past her knees, the sodden fabric bunching heavy on her thighs, and squats down at the creekbank. She scrubs the shirt until the red is faded behind mudstains, and then she lifts it over her head, as if in offering to the sky, until the rain rinses it back to a semblance of its original raw-linen white. The creekwater creeps up near her ankles as she leaves.

At the house there is little to do but tend the fire and the food while she and the clothes dry. John comes home at what feels like midday, no work in town. She hangs his wet clothes beside the others. He curls up and falls asleep beside the fire and there is little to do, again, but watch her husband and the fire and the rain.

She wakes him for dinner. His eyes are thick-rimmed and red and he stares at her, unknowing, for too long before he props himself with his right hand. He keeps his left arm curled in his lap and takes the bowl from her.

She asks him: *What's wrong?*

He taps the side of his head. *It hurts.*

*Let me look at you.* She taps her ribs, nods toward his own.

*I don't understand.*

*Let. Me. Look. At. You.*

He assents.

She tries to lift his arm above his head and he pulls it back from her. She sets the arm beside him so his knuckles rest on the floor and she lifts his shirt, gingerly, against his pain and her unwillingness. She smells the infection, sharp and sour, before she raises the fabric up above his ribs. When the wound is exposed the smell is stronger, more invasive. The skin around the wound is glossy red, swollen and puckered upward where the stitches are. Oozing pale yellow in the middle, encrusted at the edges.

She cleans the wound again, careful not to tear the stitches, careful not to press too hard on the tender skin. She tears a bandage from an old dress in need of mending. He mouths protestations at her -- she has few dresses, and they lack the money for purchasing the fabric to repair it. She averts her eyes, effectively silencing him, and binds the bandage around his ribs.

Afterward he is sullen. He lies on the bed with his back to her while she scrapes the dishes clean, packs the fire tight so it will burn long and low. When he looks back at him he is facing her, watching her, and she is suddenly of herself -- the solidity of her limbs, roughness of her motions, the wild of her hair.

He mouths: *Forgive me.*

She nods.

*Lay with me.* The upturn of his eyebrows make it a question.

She does. She lies in front of him, her back against his chest. When their love was new they laid like this and he told her things and she heard them with undamaged ears. He is silent now -- no raised voice like then, no whispers like the night before. The heaviness of apology, the swirling thick of her worry for him, the restrained weight of his

hand on her shoulder.

In the morning he makes no attempt to rise. His lips mumble indecipherable shapes. Heat roils off him like a ward. Sweat coats the sallowing skin of his face, dampens the bed beneath him. She can smell the sour of his wound through layers of fabric. When she checks his bandage she finds it damp with sweat and yellow pustulence. She cleans it with a rainwater-soaked rag and rips another bandage from the now-unmendable dress. His face registers pain as she lifts him to seated, as she ties and knots the bandage tight around his ribs, but he never tenses. His movements are languid, sodden. He returns to lying again after she is done, and sleeps not long after. She has to wake him again to feed him a few ladlefuls of millet.

While he drifts back to sleep she lays beside him, behind him, her arms encircling him, her chin resting on his shoulder, her legs entwined with his. As if by some process she might absorb his heat, inhale the fumes from his infection until it disappeared. The rise and fall of his chest becomes even, and less frantic. He vibrates softly with his snoring.

She will not let him worsen. She can do no more for him with what she has, but she can brave the rain. She slips into his hat and slicker. The heavy garment smells like him -- something mossy, something sharp and potent. She buttons it to the top. It is longer on her than him, and too broad in the shoulders, but neither overmuch. She takes a few folded dollar bills from beneath the bedroll. Before she leaves she puts out the fire, for fear it might warm him even further. She kneels next to him, lets her lips rest on his hand like a benediction.

Outside the rain falls unrelenting. As if to simply spite them now. The sky is constant gray. The wind blows the rain halfway to sideways, in angles the drive wetness down her neck despite the wide brim of John's hat. The creek, hardly visible from the hilltop on a normal day, is swollen to a river, brown and muddy, white and frothing, raging across the plain.

She had forgotten the previous night to feed their horse, and when she finds him his eyes are wide, his nostrils flaring, his temper up. She lays a hand on him to calm him and she feels the blasting of his heartbeat in his veins. She retrieves the bag of oats from inside the house and refills the horse's feedbag. She smooths his mane while he eats. She sets his bucket outside the stable to fill with rainwater and she lets him drink from it. Restraining her heart's own impulse to race, to impel her into rushing -- she will lose less time in caring for their horse than she would in being thrown from him.

When he is calm and fed and watered she takes him from the pen and saddles him. She mounts him on her second try, grips the reins tightly. Turns, turns, raises him to walking. He shakes his head against the rain. She can feel each hoofbeat in her teeth, in the bones of her hips and her back and her legs squeezed tightly to his sides. When she has his rhythm, she raises him to a trot, rising and falling in time with him.

The rain beats against them both. She feels it even through the oilskin of her slicker. In the low places the ground is waterlogged and the grass lays flat. Their riding sends crescendos of mud and water up from the ground. When the sky flashes his head turns and he breaks stride and she falls heavy into the saddle. She walks him a while.

Near town, the ground is covered with standing water, its surface disturbed and uncertain under the impact of the rain. From where she sits she can see men wading,

chest deep, between the wooden buildings, carrying tools or burlap bags over their heads. Their horse, not yet trained for fording, stops at the edge of the water. She takes him to signpost, dismounts, and ties him there.

She descends into town, ankle-deep, knee-deep. She thinks to remove the slicker - useless in the water, and dangerous if she needs falls on her to swim - but she has come too far. She presses forward. Waist-deep near the edge of town, where the unpainted storefront of the blacksmith's shop sits, its landing just above the level of the water, wooden sign swinging in the wind. Twin rows of stores, painted and unpainted, extend down the wide street, ending abruptly with the skeletal frames of stores still to come. The apothecary's shop is near the center of town, its bottom hidden under water, looking as though it were floating. Across from it, men stream in and out of the general store, with filled bags and empty, carrying away supplies.

Across the street from her the door of the tailor's shop hangs on one hinge, broken inward. The glass of the windows hangs in shards. A man sloshes out from it, carrying an armful of lacy fabrics. He holds them over his head as he leaps back into the water and streams upward, away from town.

The men are looting. She feels foolish for not having realized sooner, but nothing else within her shifts. She had intended to pay for what she needed, or to beg if she didn't have enough, but there was always a part of her, a hard and unrelenting bedrock, that would have taken it regardless.

Most of the men ignore her as she passes into the chest-deep water. One yells something, but she can read neither his lips nor his expression. She hoists herself onto the landing at the apothecary's shop. Like the other stores, its windows are shattered, its door

open. She steps inside. As she enters shelter she notices the rain in its absence, like some outer shell had been removed from her. The water on the wooden floor is ankle-deep. The experience of freedom, of movement without the water pushing back at her, is startling.

The glass at the display counter is broken. Shards of glass, some bloody, rest where tins of powder and small bottles of tincture had once been. She steps behind the counter to the great display, its shelves empty. Most of its drawers are already open -- a locked drawer along the right side has been prised or shot, its wood splintered inward -- but she searches them anyway, comes away with a few small rolls of bandage linen and a tin of aspirin powder. No bottles of iodine or tincture, no vials, no cork-stopped tubes.

She opens the door to the storeroom, just off to the right of the counter. The wall at the rear of the room is lined with cabinets, some broken, some undisturbed. Bandages and broken bottles are strewn across the floor. In the center of the room, the apothecary sits in a small chair at a small table, pale and sweating, holding his stomach with wet red hands. On the table in front of him, two tins of powder, a pistol, its chamber open, empty. He says something to her.

*Speak slowly. I can't hear you.*

His head tips a bit to one side, in recognition or in weakness. He mouths:

*Augustana?*

She nods. *I need a tincture for John.*

He shakes, and blood drools down his bottom lip. He hangs his head. She can barely see his lips moving, mumbling. He shakes again. Blood flecks the front of his shirt.

*I need a tincture, she repeats. Please. I can pay.*



His lips mumble again.

*I can't see what you're saying.*

He looks up, eyes quavering. He mouths, slowly: *Fuck you.*

She takes the empty pistol from the table, tucks it in the pocket of her coat. The apothecary makes no move to stop her. She searches the cabinets behind him. She takes two bottles of a green tincture and one of iodine. She shuts the storeroom door on her way out.

Outside the rain falls on her again, like a burden resumed. She jumps back in the water, holding bottles and bandages over her head. She joins the stream of rainbeaten men heading upward, outward from town, back into homes and cabins at the limits of the world. She doesn't know how they'll survive after the flood, with empty shops and drowned fields. She doesn't care. She cares only that there will be an after-the-flood, a struggle to continue living but a living nonetheless.

At the outskirts of town she finds her horse where she left him, calm and ready, and she walks him back the cabin. She stands for a moment at the hilltop, in the wind and the unbroken rain. Below, the swollen stream carves across the land like it might never return to its original bounds. Across the plain, the railway bridge is gone, taken by the unpredicted violence of the water. In time Augustana will go into the house. And she will kiss her husband long and slow, and he will live, and they will live, until the water takes them as well.

## CHAPTER 2

### DAVID, IN AND OF THE WORLD

David looked out his window at a place called Babylon -- right out in the open, on the corner of a street where he and his father sat in awaiting the change of a streetlight. He looked again to make sure he'd seen the name correctly, and then he pointed it out to his father, just as the light turned green. He asked about it -- if the person who owned it could have known what it meant, what it was. His father pulled away from the corner, his eyes straight ahead, seemingly apart from it all -- in the world, but not of the world, as he liked to say, which had always made David think of ethereal men, in and out of phase, passing through the things they tried to touch. In and not in. Of and not of.

David looked back over his shoulder at the building. "What do you think it is?" he asked.

His father waited so long David assumed he wasn't going to respond, then said, "I don't know what it is. I know what it stands for."

"What does it stand for?"

"You know what the first Babylon stood for?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then you know what that one stands for."

They crossed over the boulevard. The boy looked out at the hotels stacked on both sides of the street, glass and metal and fountains and gardens, all built, all shaped. At the

end of the boulevard there was a pyramid that his mother had told him shot a beam of light into the sky at night. And David had known next to nothing about pyramids, or Egypt as a whole: he knew it for a river of blood, a cloud of locusts, a flight into the wilderness led by a pillar of fire. He knew it as a place for lesser gods, the origin point for an exodus that ended in the Promised Land that was in the world but not of it. His mother had offered to take him to the pyramid hotel, and he'd declined.

"Did you have fun?" His father's voice pushed outward against the windows.

"It was nice to see Mom."

A pause. "Did you do anything fun?"

"We went to the zoo. And the museum."

His father bent his brow downward and pulled down the driver's sun visor to block the mid-afternoon sun. "Did she take you to look at the dinosaurs?" He asked.

The boy shook his head. "I asked her not to."

"Did she take you to work with her?"

David shook his head. His mother had worked four days that week, including today; that morning she'd apologized for not making the flight with him herself, although she didn't have the money and she didn't particularly like flying and she couldn't have taken the time off from work anyway. She had hugged him, smelling slightly of plastic, strongly of oversweet fruit. She told him to say hello to his father, and to call when they landed safely. She told him to be good, without telling him how. A week before his father had told him the same, except that his father had said to *be on his guard*.

"What did you do?" His father asked.

"She left me some things at the apartment. Movies. I read."

“What kinds of movies?”

“I didn’t watch them.”

They stopped at another intersection. His father glared upward at a video billboard featuring a shirtless man and a gaggle of plumed, barelegged showgirls. He adjusted the knot of his tie, the car’s air conditioning controls. His lips moved, but the boy didn’t hear what he said. And then the light was green again and they were moving again, out of Egypt, out of Babylon.

They had time before they needed to be at the airport, so they stopped to eat at a near-empty steakhouse with lassos and steer horns and faded pictures of bullriders along the walls. They sat side-by-side in a booth beneath a lone-star flag and a black-and-white photograph of an old-time rancher staring blank-eyed into the camera. David’s father ordered a battered-and-fried onion for their appetizer and a T-bone cooked rare for himself. David was fond of chicken fingers, but he ordered steak medallions, and just before their waitress left he asked if he could have them cooked rare as well. She smiled and nodded before disappearing into the back of the restaurant with their order.

David stared up at the picture on the wall -- the rancher posed unnaturally in dungarees and vest, his eyes and gloved hands motion-blurred, the rest of him cut sharp like he were carved in stone. David wondered about the world beyond the borders of the photo -- if its black-and-white women in their bonnets and their puffy skirts could have imagined David’s colored world, cars and towering hotels and steakhouses where old ranchers were framed and put on walls as decoration. How the world had pressed onward.

His father asked him, “Did you miss home?”

“Yes, sir.” He looked down.

“What’d you miss the most?”

He thought a moment. “I missed youth group on Wednesday.”

“They missed you too, Mr. Harbison said. They missed your voice.”

David nodded, and wrapped his finger in the satin of his clip-on tie.

“It was strange at home without you being there,” his father said.

David chanced a look over at him. “There’s more hair on your beard,” he said.

His father reddened slightly. “I haven’t had the chance to shave,” he said.

“Okay.”

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay.”

They sat in silence a while before his father leaned over, nudging David with his elbow. “Maybe I’m turning into Methuselah,” he said. “Or Abraham. I’d prefer Abraham.” He nodded to himself, like he was in need of his own agreement.

David laughed.

“Who will you be?” His father asked.

“I’ll be David,” he said, and his father laughed.

The waiter brought out their onion, warning them of how hot the plate was, and laid it between the two of them. David reached up for it -- then caught himself, his hand suspended in the air like he had forgotten how it arrived there. He dropped them to the table, placed them back in his lap. Beside him his father sat unmoving.

His father said, “Grace.”

And David interlaced his fingers, closed his eyes, and dropped his chin to the space between his collarbones. He tried to summon an unwavering voice and failed. He

let out a rote prayer from memory, waited for his father to say “Amen,” and then opened his eyes to his empty plate and the fried onion just to the left of it, damning him.

“Are you out of practice?” His father asked.

“No, sir.”

“You seem out of practice.”

“I’m sorry.”

His father tore a chunk of the onion off for himself, then placed a smaller chunk on David’s plate. “What’s done is done,” he said.

The airport was a city unto itself, a sprawl of buildings joined by rail lines and hallways white and narrow like the insides of fossilized bones. They walked among and against a shifting puzzle of commuters. The wheels of the boy’s luggage whispered white noise over pile carpet, staccato clatter over metal gratings. Slot machines, clustered every few hundred feet, hummed electric arpeggios; David’s father stared past them, bending their course slightly so they never came too close to one, his pace just slow enough to allow the boy to keep up.

As they boarded the plane David’s father seemed to collect something of himself, and he took David’s rolling bag by the handle and carried it. David shuffled down the aisle, stop-start, unsure of how to occupy his hands. When they reached their row David sat while his father stowed the bag overhead. He looked out the window at the men on the tarmac wheeling luggage carts. He felt his father sit down next to him. A flight attendant welcomed them aboard, and directed their attention to the safety video playing on the fold-down screen above them.

“Maybe I should have called more often,” his father said.

The boy shrugged. "It's okay."

"Can I get you a book?"

On the video screen, a flight attendant demonstrated how to fasten a safety belt, how to use the overhead respirators in an emergency. The orange-vested men outside loaded the last suitcase, made motions to each other with their hands. The luggage cart wheeled away, empty.

"I don't think we can get up right now," the boy said.

"I can grab one for you after takeoff. Which one do you want?"

"Can I think about it?"

Some part of the otherness faded, and his father, in the present, in the full, faced him, looking at the boy's eyes, his seatbelt, his shirt and tie. "Sure," he said. "Which ones did you bring?"

"I don't think I brought the one I want."

"Okay," his father repeated. "Which ones did you bring?"

The men outside stepped away from the plane, waving lighted cones. The low-dipping sun made giants of their shadows -- solid and sharp where the men's feet rooted them, fuzzy at their furthest point. In and not in. Of and not of. The plane drifted forward. The boy named a book.

"That's the only one you brought?"

"No, sir. That's the one I want."

"Okay," his father said, and gave a nod of approval or finality. "As soon as we're in the air."

The plane stopped at the beginning of the runway, settling in, collecting itself.

The engines spun, louder, higher-pitched. The plane kicked forward, and its insistent speed pressed David into the back of his seat. As it gathered speed he thought the same thing he did during every takeoff, Dallas-to-Las Vegas, Las Vegas-to-Dallas: *this is the time we fail ourselves and the plane comes back to earth, burning*. But the speed pressed him further back, and the pits and scars and paint on the tarmac bled together into a single, uniform grey. Then the rumble of landing gear on pavement ceased, the gravity pressed down, and the tarmac dropped from underneath them.

“You’re getting better with takeoffs,” his father said. “You used to get so afraid.”

The concrete fell away. The boy laid his head against cold windowglass.

At the edge of the city, at the edge of the desert, the pyramid shot a pillar of light into the sky. Around it, the city erupted out of the earth, an addendum of sand, rock, and steel, lit with neon and burning tungsten. Shadows of cars, preceded by their arcing headlights, maypole-danced through gridded streets. And all of it, the boy thought -- its lines, its swells and angles, its precisions and its unrestrained expressions -- all of it, magnificent.



## CHAPTER 3

### MICHAEL, WHOM I LAST HEARD DYING

The new couple here have unlined mouths and a single child who looks like he was carved out of a block of fresh soap -- he's unblemished, is what I mean. I'd forgotten unblemished things existed. I'd forgotten how to notice them, even. I didn't notice anything special about the boy, in fact, until he tripped over the doorsill between the dining room and the kitchen (which always has been tricky, you'll remember) and landed on his knees and elbows on the tile. Afterward he sat up and stared at the little dots of blood on the thin parts of his elbow with something like confusion on his face. Then realization, I think, at the same time it came to me -- he was flawed not, but only because he'd been unflawed before.

And then he howled, from one variety of pain or another.

His mother and father (or maybe *the* mother and *the* father, since he doesn't really look like either of them and the flat planes of the mother's body make it impossible for me to believe that anything remotely childlike could have come from her) do what you would expect the parents of a flawless boy to do: they smother him. The father arrives in a few seconds, talking to the boy in tones you'd think he made just for the occasion, measured and cut out of velvet, just so. The mother comes five seconds later with a wet paper towel and disinfectant and bandages from her purse.

They carry him to the bathroom. They're faster than I am, almost violent in their

speed, like they realize instinctively how hard the borders of lives are. It makes them impossible to follow. Just as I find comfort in the corners of a place they're up again and drifting, passing through doors and through the centers of rooms like there were nothing there at all. (I mostly confine myself to corners; I've grown tired of entrances and the centers of rooms exhaust me, but I've found comfort in vertices, where there's no direction but *out*).

Too quickly, the boy rips down the stairs again. The mother calls out from the bathroom for him to walk while he's in the house. He slows to a trot, stopping only to negotiate carefully the doorway between the dining room and the kitchen. The mother and the father are not far behind: ambling by, joined at the hip. How long can they have been married? Three years? Four?

*What are you thinking?* She asks. She nudges him with her thumb, just to touch him.

*I'm thinking about potential.*

*Potential*, she repeats, like a sacred name.

They come back in stained jeans and sweatpants, the boy in a small construction hat that he knocks against every few minutes. They bring toolboxes and rented machines. They change things.

They flay away the wallpaper and slather the walls beneath with latex paint in soft palettes. They take belt sanders to the floors. They smooth out the scratches and the divots we made with the soles of our shoes. Even the places where the stillfaced men had already come (and have I told you about the stillfaced men, who wiped us off the floors and bleached us out, who steamed the smells of our bodies from the closet and from the

curtains?) the mother and the father take their grinder to the rough spots. They lay the wood bare, raw and infantile, and then they stain it -- and I can think of no better word than *stain* -- and I sit for days in the corners of empty rooms while varnish dries.

A part of me feels like I would be right to rage at them but at their worst they're nothing more than vandals, touching the skin of this place but leaving intact its deep bones. I'm reminded, every time I think of it, of your "vacation" shirt -- an eyesore (apologies), but through the thin fabric of it my fingers still knew where to look, what to seek for.

And then they're out front, in a truck, and men are carrying boxes and furniture through the doors. Little things shift, over the days: they put their sofa along a different wall of the living and install a microbrew in the den. They turn your study to a playroom for the boy. In the place where your desk sat he builds box forts and buries his attentions in video games. On the walls they hang group portraits and pictures of people I don't know.

In their early days they approach the house like they're not entirely sure they live there. They live out of boxes and suitcase, and eat takeout food and frozen pizzas on the floor. As the weeks pass on they grow into the space, and settle into patterns: they wake, and eat cold cereal in the mornings; the mother leaves the house first, then the father and the boy shortly after; they come back at night for dinner, for books and television; before bed they brush their teeth and pray together in the boy's room. (Can you imagine? In this house, they pray -- and for such short-sighted and insipid things).

Between their comings and their goings it's like they'd never moved in at all, and the house is ours again, only littered with their detritus, their papers and toys and the

fleeting traces of the heat from their bodies. At times I wander through their rooms but mostly I keep to the places where the bones are closest to the surface -- the stairs, the hallways -- and though I never loved the garden I increasingly find myself there, listening to the wind. The mother and the father make a few attempts at gardening early on, but mostly to entwine themselves in conversation, never to cultivate. Their hands are too smooth and their gloves are bought new for the occasion, skin-hugging and cleverly constructed. They haven't got the teeth for it. They realize this not long after I do, and afterward they let the garden grow wild, bursting, curling the wind into such lovely shapes with no one there to see them but me.

In the empty times, I call for you.

Michael.

Michael, subtle thunder in my ribs. I've looked for you in the garden and even, briefly, in the centers of things where *beingness* assaults me but there is nothing to be found. Not a scrap of you. If I'd known what they were taking when the stillfaced men cut away the pieces of you from the carpet, when they washed and rinsed and dried you from the baseboard, I would have howled at them. I would have spit pieces of myself. I would have made sharp things from my fingers and ruined them.

When did you leave? Had you gone already by the time the killing men came upstairs, found me in my corner, whispering your name? That I could have hidden, pressed against two walls and a floor inside our closet, where the smell of you fell heavy from your sweaters, while sounds of you, no less sharp for coming dampened through the floorboards, cut me to tatters, before I was battered, before I was cut, with my breath hot against my face from my hand pressed tight to my mouth to catch my own sounds, before

my own sounds were torn from me, and what sounds were torn from me -- I've soaked in this. But, Michael, I could not have been there for you. *I could not have been there for you.*

I carry this through the empty shapes of rooms that held you, and I whisper your name into ethereal nothing.

This thing happens: the boy disappears.

He's in the woods behind the garden, where the mother and the father have begun to take him on their walks, where the mother and the father had begun to consent to him going by himself. The father instructs the boy to stay where he could be seen from the kitchen window (where once you kissed me, and pointed outward in the winter, saying *sparrow, nuthatch, Carolina wren*) and then the father finds reason to walk through the kitchen every few minutes, past the window, so sharp his eyes. When the boy interested me I would watch him too, while he sifted between trees into sunny spots, running toward or away from something imagined.

But I don't notice when he's gone, not until the father passes through the garden, calling out for him, curving his name like a sickle -- the first part of it wide and strong, the second thinning, rising upward to a sharp and single point. His face wide-eyed and baretoothed like someone had peeled away his skin. His hands at his sides, making nervous patterns, his thumb climbing up and down the tips of his other fingers. And then he's gone, passed into the woods, and his voice cuts back to me through the trees.

The mother comes and stands at the kitchen window like she was framed in it. Every bit of her face pulling upward. Even her hands rise constantly, to cover her mouth, to smooth an eyebrow, to push back her hair. When she disappears from the window I

fear she's gone to do something regrettable, but then she's there on the back stairs, beneath the trellis, in the garden next to me -- pacing her worry over the corpses of our azaleas.

The rustle through the trees and undergrowth precedes the father's return. He comes out alone, crumpled in the middle, collapsing further inward with each breath. The mother raises up her finger like a duelist's saber, and says: *no*. She repeats it, over and over, like there's enough force in her to revoke whatever he's brought with him.

*I couldn't find him*, he says.

*No. No, sweetie.*

I hadn't noticed him start crying, but his face is wet. *Angie, we have to call the police.*

*No*. She shakes her head. *Go back.*

*Angie.*

*He's there. Sweetie, I know it.* She breathes heavy. *Sweetie, he's out there. I can feel it.*

He sobs twice, and then he wipes underneath his eyes. He looks at her, unsure. *I looked for an hour. The woods aren't that big, love.*

She walks over to him, takes his head in her hands and rests her thumbs on his cheekbones, wiping away the last of his tears. She hugs him. *He's there*, she says into his ear. *He's there, he's there, he's there, he's there, he's there.*

They go into the woods together, and come back alone.

The stillfaced men (and now a single stillfaced woman) return, with guns strapped

to their hips and slipquick questions, little knives through the ribs -- *where were the two of you? Can you think of anyone who would want to hurt him?* Each question breaks the mother a little further; the father, already broken, is ground to smaller pieces.

Bluejacketed men walk gridlines in the woods and the backyard. (And oh the poor azaleas now). In the garden, low-slung dogs come close to me, sniff at me, and shy away. Their handlers put scraps of things to their noses and they buck against their leashes and take off on a tear, howling, the men racing behind them. Not long after, they return from the woods triumphantly bearing a single, laceless shoe.

Before nightfall the father's parents arrive, pulling onto the lawn in a weathered Cadillac. They have thick jaws and thick hair and an accent that adds soft *u*'s to every *o*. They call the father *son*, the mother *Angela*, and wrap them both in lasting embraces. The father's mother sits with them in the living room while his father greets the stillfaced men by name. In their company the father returns to something smaller, lower-shouldered, with the barest hint of an accent.

The mother's parents arrive by taxi in the morning, wheeling luggage behind them. Her sister comes in the early afternoon in a small car. The mother's parents are as flat and angled as she is but her sister is an outlier -- rounded, young. She speaks loudly, and makes the mother tense up. Each of them carries a similar kind of heaviness, in that they *absorb* -- the weight of their attentions, of their concerns, pull the rooms toward them.

In a different time I would expect sharp conflict but the families merge with ease, trading introductions and pleasant questions and quiet, low-toned condolences. The mothers share an interest in gardening (you should see their faces when they walk out to

see ours), while the fathers and the mother's sister share a stonefaced sense of humor and a fond memories of the boy's telephone etiquette. Each set of parents is each delighted to discover religion in the other, and they hold hands in the living room and pray, each morning, each night, as though they were one family.

At night the mother and the father crawl into opposite sides of the bed and lay with just their fingers touching and if anything is said it's a variation on *when will this be over*. During the days they're almost always near disbelief, like they've been trying to explain something simple and essential and everyone around them is hostile in their misunderstanding. It winds them. It scrapes their emotion thin. It manifests in odd ways: the mother eats, in small portions but nearly constantly, and no one says anything but the cabinets are kept stocked. The father storms out of a conversation with the mother's sister and no one in the family can determine why. She repeats what she said, twice, and on the second try the mother tells her it's because when she spoke about the boy she said *was* instead of *is*.

The sister protests: I was talking about when he was *three*, for Chrissakes.

The father, when he comes back down, will not stop saying that he's sorry and the families will not stop reassuring him.

There's nothing signaling when it's over; it just is, irreversibly. The stillfaced men shake hands and apologize and leave together. In the absence of their authority and their solemn promises the families force desperate levity, cooking larger meals, trading stories of the mother and the father in their youth and letting out spikes of laughter. When they find time alone, they hide; they find side rooms, corners, to let go in. The mother's mother cries in the garden. The father's father sits in your old study for an hour. The



mother's sister bakes endlessly.

They are each of them, in different ways, approaching the prospect of something irrevocable. The mother and the father fare worst of all, walking through their days choreographed, barely sleeping, passing each other on the way to the master bathroom to cry. Watching from the corners, I wonder: If I had outlived you, what hopeless mess would I have been? Sitting alone in rooms, trying to reduce you to something small enough that I could carry you with me when I moved (and how quickly I'd have left this house behind if I'd been forced to live in it alone). I'd have lost myself searching for home in strange places. I'd have stepped off the edge of someplace high.

I think as I watch them, I might be the fortunate one. I had an *end*, a severance. I never had to live without you. I never had to dwell on your absence or watch your memory recede into the distance. I am alone, but I can be alone. I miss you, but I'll always miss you. But the part of me that would have wandered, that would have kept struggling to make something new of itself, is passed. My existence now is small and easy to contemplate. Some part of me thinks I ought to thank the killing men.

The families leave with hugs and long stares at the floorboards. The mother's parents last of all, and by now beyond forced optimism. Their offer of prayers and their admonishment to stay strong, to call the second there's a need for anything, are no longer for the mother and the father of a flawless boy who's coming back.

In the days afterward they keep the house in constant noise. Both TVs and the radio in the kitchen. When they leave in the mornings for their jobs they keep them on and blaring. (The noises make little tremors in the floors, in the walls, the house taking up their voices). They spend the evenings passing each other by, and even when they find

themselves together they speak like they were approaching grieving strangers, begging pardon, asking permission. They touch each other like children. After days the mother starts to try familiar jokes; she tastes them, listening for the sound of them in the air. The father laughs, or not, and checks her response. They triangulate each other.

In months the father can touch again the place on the mother's neck that he used to and the mother has winnowed out their jokes, made new ones. (The father trips not far from where the boy did; not remembering the Elbow Incident, they latch on. She calls him 'boogaloo' for his manic contortions in falling and in response he tries an outdated breakdance. She smiles like breaking glass). By then they find a new rhythm in their lovemaking and the mother, unknown to the father, has started to look at fertility information.

And one night the father says, *this fucking house*.

It's true; there's something heavier in its timber, waterlogged. Something I don't entirely recognize.

In the nights that follow they type on their computers and mutter back and forth about *cost of living* and *upgrade versus sidegrade*. One morning, watching from the garden, I see the father walk out into the driveway in a freshly-pressed suit. The mother kisses him on the cheek and whispers something in his ear. He returns a day later, smiling, and the mother has champagne waiting.

They hire moving men again, but they box up the things in the boy's room themselves. One box for keepsakes, filled slowly and with short breaths; half a dozen for donation. When they've emptied out the house and the trucks out front have driven away they stand in the center of the living room with their arms around each other and look: the

kitchen doorway, the stairs, the dining room.

I could tell them: he isn't there. No echoes of his manic screams or footfalls. Nothing of him in the deepest parts of the house. You'll look for days and never find him.

They only look for seconds, and they leave.

A woman in a skirt and jacket comes and goes, bringing small families with her, and outside of that the house is quiet. The echoes of the mother and the father die down; their presences dry out. Deep bones are left. I drift between corners.

The father's father comes back. I hardly recognize him -- he hasn't changed, but I've begun to forget things that exist beyond the boundaries of here. He pulls his Cadillac into the driveway. He sits in it, cries, and drives away.

Only then I look for him -- the boy, I mean. Out of some whim of emotion, the memory of a torn elbow and a mother with her salve. I set out from the garden the next morning, before dawn, and by the time the sun is risen I'm within the shadows of trees. The woods are unbordered, no corners and no center, open but for the brown-grey trees javelined sporadically into the ground. Underfoot thin layerings of dead things. But how the wind curls here, Michael. Cold and thick, the leaves riding on its eddies like little miracles.

I call out for the boy. In the grey of the woods, over the noise of the wind, it makes no sound.

I go further. Far from home, Michael, where greys deepen into blacks and the wind is thin and cutting. I see no trees and know nothing familiar here. I hear the faint sound of water from a stream that I'd forgotten or had never known.

It's cold and I am growing slow. Behind me, in the darkness, there's nothing but

the house, blazing bright like God's only and beloved star. I know its bones. I've lived in its corners. I whispered your name in the closet while I waited.

Michael, whom I last heard dying.

Michael: I am sorry.

Michael.

Michael.

## CHAPTER 4

### DEVIN, IN THE QUIET DARK

There was a police officer in my living room who was talking to me about insurance and new deadbolts. He was telling me, “I don’t think we’re ever going to find your things.” He had no hat on -- it was tucked under his arm -- and sweat pooled in the indentation left by his hatband. His face was too young for how quickly his hairline was receding. I’d looked at his badge twice but I didn’t remember his name. J, something. Officer Johnson. Officer Jenkins.

He was looking at me.

I said, “Thank you, Officer Jenkins.”

Something strange happened with his face, and he said, “Kavanaugh.”

“Kavanaugh.”

“You have my card?”

“I do. I’ll call if I need anything.”

“Call if you *remember* anything.”

“Yes.”

His face did something strange again and he left.

I closed the door behind him. It swung back through the blown-out doorframe and hung ajar.

When I went back to the living room the empty spaces were still there. There was

a footprint in the middle of the carpet, shallow like the boot it came from had been worn down or the person who wore it was light, maybe wispy. I pictured the invader that way – faded, like a ghost in a movie where only I could see him and everyone else saw nothing, just DVDs spewing off the shelves onto the floor, televisions and computers and stereos carrying themselves out the front door. And the angry-looking police officer in the movie who had to take my statement would say something like, *it can't be a ghost because ghosts don't kick in doors*, while whoever was playing me would explain, ghosts don't steal TVs either.

It would be rated PG, probably, but in my head it was hard R.

The room had been thrown out of balance. The negative weight of the stolen things, the positive weight of the out-of-place ones, the constant anchor of the futon on the north wall, untouched and silent, like it hadn't seen a thing -- it all made everything feel unsettled. Nothing still was still, everything buzzed, barely able to contain its own energy. Like it all just wanted to burst, scream, *make noise*, just to cover up the noise that wasn't there, just to cover up the noise that was, the ones I was making: a rasping breath, a hard-beating heartbeat.

I grabbed a pair of shoes. I put them on in the hallway while the apartment door crept back open behind me. I left it like that – half-open, an invitation for anyone to come and take what was left, if anything that was left was worth taking.

I walked a lap around the block. It was cool, windy, the evening sun still bright and my eyes uncovered and squinting. The air smelled terminal, like fall evenings do – brittle leaves, exposed branches, air ready to pivot into winter without warning. The trees lining the street shed orange and brown, shifting in the wind, and every few houses kids

were making leaf piles and screaming as they jumped into them, sometimes two or three kids at once, discordant tones competing for volume, for length. I passed two joggers and walker, and each time I did I said hello and every time I said hello I hoped the blandness of my smile and my work clothes, slacks and a tie, would distract from what I assumed was a knitting between my eyebrows and identical knots on either side of my jaw.

When I reached my building again I thought of my front door creaking open and I made another lap. A few kids waved at me, and I pretended not to see. By my fourth lap, however, they were pointing, and one was laughing, and I was thinking about how right the world would be if in the morning they all found ticks puncturing the skin over their skulls, and when I got back to the apartment and walked to the parking lot and get into my car and shut the door solid.

I exhaled, slow, in tensile quiet.

There were things I still needed to do. Call my landlord, call the insurance agency, maybe call a locksmith. These were fixing people; they could fix things. Couldn't *renew* them, couldn't *restore* them, but they might reset them to a point I might find recognizable, to a point where I could trust its boundaries to keep the noise of others out, to keep my own constant noises in. Until then, I could call Mom or Dad, see if one of them would let me stay over. I could try and think of a friend, or a coworker. I could get a hotel.

Or I could get a doorstep, and something knifelike for protection and peace of mind, and a new TV.

When the noise of rushing blood faded from my ears I heard the outside sounds again as though from underneath a tight-pressed pillow. I fiddled with my hands, fingers

wiggling. I considered the shifter, the steering wheel, the dormant radio knob. I took the keys from my pocket and started the car. Throttle sputter, engine roar, radio ripping to life – a talk station, a man decrying the nation’s fiscal policy in pleasant baritone. I stilled my hands. Somewhere behind my eyes, something worrisome receded.

A guy in the electronics department asked if he could help me. He was taller than I was, and soft, and he had a goatee. He wore a nametag but the letters were scratched beyond recognizing. I told him no, and he drifted backward a bit. He lingered in my peripheral vision.

I stepped sideways in front of a range of TVs bolted to the wall. The prices had dropped since I’d last bought one -- I had expected to walk out with a twenty-two-inch, but there were five different thirty-two inch TVs in the price range I had expected to pay.

“The OmniVox,” the electronics guy said from behind me, “is a killer.” He was pointing toward a TV on the bottom row, indistinguishable from the others. “That’s the one I’ve got. Good for digital, watching DVDs, I don’t know if you’re into video games at all?”

I shrugged.

“Well, video games or not, it’s a good buy.”

“Okay,” I said. “I’ll take that one.”

“*But*, the Seversson, though, with the TrueBlack technology? Twenty dollars more, and you’ll definitely see a difference in the depth of black you get. It’s worth it if you’re a videophile. You look like you might be a videophile.”

“Is it better?” I asked.

“Hands down.”



“Okay,” I said, “I’ll take that one.”

“*But*, the 240Hz, though -- it’ll get to you if you’re not used to it. It sort of makes everything look like a soap opera, and I’m imagining you’re not into soap operas. Once you get used to it, you won’t go back, but in the meantime, you know?”

“Okay,” I said, “I’ll take that one.”

“Which one? We talked about a couple.”

“The first one.”

“The OmniVox. Good buy.”

He walked through a nearby set of double doors. Sometime between when he’d gone and when he came back, I recalled, in high-def clarity, the image of my wallet lying on the desk in the place where my computer monitor had been.

He asked, “Can I take this up front for you?”

I told him, “Sure,” and when his back was turned I left.

In the hallway of my building I dangled my keys at my side, spinning them through my fingers. As I neared my door I lifted the key to elbow height, just soon enough to see the door already ajar, and to repeat the same questions I’d come home to earlier that day -- had I forgotten to close it? Had the landlord scheduled maintenance? -- and, half second later, to come to the same answers. And there it all was again – holes and scatter, undisturbed. I had a very distinct feeling of being powerless – like a grounded child, barred inside his room, while the world came together and apart outside the walls.

So, fuck it.

I laid down to sleep, still in my work clothes, sprawled out on the futon because

I'd taken to sleeping there over the last six months or so – dozing off under the glow of *TVClassic* and *SportsCast*, waking up to a cell phone alarm and a salesman on TV pitching the Eggulator or the WonderWand or the MartinPress. In the absence of my stolen things I had no such lullabies, so I tried to recreate inane stories set against the opening themes of *SportsCast*, told in the lead anchor's voice:

*The Wildcats defeated the Bobcats, seventy-two to six.*

*The Bearcats went to quintuple overtime against the Mountain Lions, losing four players between the two of them to heat exhaustion.*

*The marquee player for the Ocelots was convicted for securities fraud and the unlawful possession of an exotic bird, and would likely be traded to the Caracals in exchange for a seventh-round draft pick.*

If I closed my eyes I could draw the SportsCast studio in my mind, the anchor with his salt-and-pepper goatee, the infographics in the upper right quarter of my screen - - but always some noise or sensation or baseless, inexplicable fear, would dissolve the studio, mute the music, bring me back into the room. Ad infinitum, ad absurdum.

A little after midnight – 12:15 or so – my neighbor came home. I heard him across the wall in individual sounds, like they were gift-wrapped for me: the crunch of the key in his lock, the creak of the hinges as the door opened, heavy thud as it swung against the doorstep. Then silence – and I pictured him going to the kitchen, opening a beer, flipping through mail. Maybe a magazine, maybe one of the same ones I got.

And then laughter, hollow, pre-recorded and electric, joyless for all its processing.

And then a blink of silence.

And then: electric cheering. A blink of silence. The liquid baritone of a

newscaster. Blink. Staccato of a machine gun. Swelling orchestral music. A man yelling: *go go go*. Blink. The post-commercial return music for *SportsCast*.

I felt something like shame at the way my heart sent subtle thunder through my ribs.

And then a voice that was always a little too loud when heard from within the same room, but just loud enough when heard across the across the wall: *We're back to SportsCast – I'm Tony Pescatoni, burning the midnight oil as always, and we're jumping right in to the daily favorites*. The daily favorites were my least favorite part of SportsCast, but tonight they were a godsend. I listened the way they must have listened to radio serials back in the forties. I listen the way lonely indoor dogs listen for the sound of tires on gravel.

After the daily favorites they did the two-minute drill; after the two minute drill, expert opinion; after expert opinion, open letter; after open letter, buzzer beater. After buzzer beater my neighbor shut off the TV and I lay awhile in the lightless, dying glow, the strains of theme music and echoes of statistics bouncing around inside my head. The pleasant numbness diminishing the way oxidized metal diminishes, rusting from the inside out until only the edges were left. And in the middle another absence, my silence, his.

He would be going to bed soon – and I felt somehow regretful, like I'd missed a chance to... I don't know. Walk over there in wrinkled workclothes and sockfeet, knock on the door and count the seconds until he answered, wearing jogging pants and an old t-shirt, looking slightly angry. Say, *Hey, I'm Devin. I was just listening to you watch TV and I thought maybe we could hang out. We don't even have to hang out, really. You*

*could go to sleep and I'd just watch your TV. Or you could just let me borrow it. Mine got stolen.*

*I probably should have opened with that.*

*And he'd say, sure, Devin, that sounds normal.*

*And I'd say, sure to which part? There were three proposals.*

*He'd shrug. Any of 'em.*

*Wow. Thank you. You're very understanding.*

*What's not to understand?*

*Exactly. Exactly.*

*I wish you'd come over a long time ago, Devin.*

*And I'd say, Why?*

## CHAPTER 5

### KRAVITZ, VICTIM

I wanted to be there when Kravitz woke up, but they weren't letting in anyone but family, which meant Gloria and her parents and no one else – not lawyers, not reporters, not the three or so politicians who showed up ready to make an issue out of it. Me and Bailey made a run at it, flashed badges and talked in terms we'd mostly heard on Law & Order, and they led us into waiting room and told us they'd let us know when he was ready.

There was a table in the corner of the room with a coffee dispenser and a package of cookies, still mostly untouched. The room was empty except for Bailey and me, and I realized that it wasn't a waiting room at all, it was a conference room they'd converted out of foresight or necessity; there was a projector hanging from the ceiling and a screen on the far wall, but they'd taken out the conference table and replaced it with rows after row of metal folding chairs. It was an overflow room; we'd pulled an all-nighter taking statements, and by the time we got to the hospital all the well-wishers and the curious had already filled one waiting room, maybe two.

We grabbed a couple cups and some cookies – we'd grabbed coffee on the way, but we were both starting to drag a little – and we sat in the back row. Bailey went over her notes; I just stared out the doorway into the hall, watching nurses and orderlies go by, bearing clipboards, bearing people broken in some way or another. I hadn't been in an ICU since Abbie was born, but it was pretty much the same – doctors and patients and

families and friends, all there for different reasons, all hoping for the same things, none fully expecting them.

I wanted to be there when Kravitz woke up, but while we waited I wanted to be anywhere else.

One of the orderlies ushered another bystander into the room. I recognized her, eventually; she'd written a story for her high school paper about the meth problem in town, and went on a ride-along with me as part the research. Her name was Melanie, or Mallory, something with M, and she was in the same class as Kravitz. Probably his same age – eighteen -- but this morning she could have been anywhere between twenty-five and sixty. She wore a sweater and sweatpants, opposite colors and both wrinkled. Dressed in the dark, probably, no time for hair or makeup, just time enough to throw something on, hop in the car, and make the three-hour drive north.

"Officer Duncan?" She might have tried a smile, but it collapsed before it could become anything, and then her eyes were brimming with tears and she was coming at me and I hardly had time enough to stand before she'd wrapped herself around me, sobbing, sniffing, pressed into my chest.

I hugged her back, looked over to Bailey for some help and received a shrug in return. Comfort wasn't a specialty for either of us. I felt sorry for the girl; to come all this way, to need all this release, and then the first familiar faces you see are the least qualified to help you.

"I'm sorry," I said, and repeated it, over and over, until she let me go.

We told her what happened; we had to stop twice while she busted into tears. She and Kravitz were close, apparently, went to prom together the past weekend, so we

glossed over the worst parts. She asked if we knew who did it, and we said no; she asked us to find whoever it was and take them in, and we said okay. All just words, practically scripted. She needed to say them, and she needed us to respond in kind. The comfort of the familiar, the established. That we could do.

Someone yelled something in the hallway, and I looked up to see a man in a blazer, microphone in hand, half-jogging in to the room; another man followed closely behind, bearing a camera on his shoulder. He stopped at our row, shuffling sideways through the chairs until he stood over us, hand outstretched, eyes shuffling between Bailey and Melanie. "Chuck Harland," he said, "TV 6 news."

Melanie took his hand. "Melanie," she offered.

His eyes brightened, and he shot a look over his shoulder at the cameraman. "Melanie --" he stopped. "Melanie, would it be okay if we ask you a few questions? It won't take long at all."

She shook her head. "I don't want to talk right now, I'm --" she gestured toward herself, her wrinkled clothes, her puffy eyes, her lack of sleep, her grief.

"I think you look just fine." He managed a smile that was both warm and somber, and I couldn't decide if I wanted to thank him or kick his teeth in. "It'll only be a few minutes."

"I'm sorry," she said, shaking her head again.

More commotion from the hallway; another news crew came in, and then another, pushing toward us, knocking chairs out of their way. One of the cameramen nudged the other, muttered "we were here first" a little too loudly, and then it became a muted war, three news crews quietly and politely battling for position behind Chuck Harland.

Melanie began to cry.

The cameramen swooped into action, climbing over chairs to get the right angle; spotlights blinded us from four different directions, and Melanie again buried her face in my chest, and I wrapped an arm around her as if it could stop the lights or the cameras from reaching us.

Bailey sighed. "Take it to one of the other rooms, guys."

"Who are you?" Chuck asked, nearly glaring.

She took her badge from her coat pocket and held it up so everyone could see it. "You're interfering with a police investigation," she said. "So, please – take it to another room."

Bailey and I had gone to the scene, but they'd life-flighted him out before we got there. All we had to go on was the testimony of the ones who found him: naked body, beaten, bleeding, lying in the middle of the road with a trail of bloody footsteps – his own – leading back a few hundred yards. The ones who found him – Tim and Angela Marsden, both new to town – had been visibly shaken; Angela looked like she'd been crying, but it might have been the cold. It was awful, they said. So much blood.

So Bailey and I both had an idea of what to expect when they finally came and led us into Kravitz's room. Melanie, however, had been spared the worst of the details, so she stared, confusedly, until it dawned on her that the swollen, bandaged face she was staring belonged to none other than Kravitz, and she ran into the bathroom and vomited. Gloria ran in after her, and for a while the only sounds in the room were Kravitz's labored breathing and the sobs of Gloria and Melanie.

Eventually, he rolled a bloody eye down toward us and said, "So it's pretty bad,



huh?"

I'd met Kravitz a few times, all when he was younger, back when his father was still around and the neighbors were making domestic calls every other night. Back then he was still Travis, the kid everyone knew but didn't know. I'd seen him around town since then; so he was familiar enough that I should have recognized something about him, but he was completely alien to me.

"Not as bad as you might think," Bailey said. "How's it feel?"

He coughed, or laughed. "Can't feel a thing. Morphine or something. Powerful stuff."

In the bathroom, Melanie let out something approximating a wail; Kravitz tried to nod his head in her direction, but in the end had to settle on throwing a glance at the bathroom. "She OK?"

"Would you be?" I asked.

Bailey rolled her eyes – apparently I'd said something insensitive – and Kravitz coughed/laughed again. "How are you guys doing?"

"How are you doing, Kravitz?" Bailey walked to the side of his bed, and laid a hand on his shoulder. "We didn't come up to talk about us."

He rolled his eye over at her, then up at the ceiling. "Like I said – can't feel a thing."

"I wasn't talking physically." Her tone was soft, even, but her eyes were staring holes in the side of his head, and she had no intention of letting up – not on his feelings, not on his testimony. She was leaving with answers.

He sighed. "It is what it is."

"What does that mean?"

"Can we talk about it later, Mrs. Bailey?" He closed his eye and exhaled deeply.

"I just – I don't want to be there right now."

"Bailey –" I started.

She shook her head, eyes never wavering. "Not now, Mike." Then, to him:

"Travis, the sooner you can --"

She was interrupted by the bathroom door; Melanie, eyes newly red-rimmed, emerged from the room, hands covering her nose and mouth, some sort of mask or muzzle. She held back for as long as it took her to get to Kravitz's side, but she lost all control after that; she practically collapsed on him, hugging, crying, saying something that began with "I'm so --" and ended with a string of words all slurred together and rendered meaningless as grief took hold of her face. Kravitz was crying, too, from what I could see, and his lips were moving, whispering something into her ear.

I felt almost dirty, watching them. Like I shouldn't be allowed to witness something like that.

Gloria came out of the bathroom a little later. As long as we'd both known her she'd seemed perpetually on the edge of shattering, like the next wrong touch or word would finally send her over the brink. It never did, of course; we'd helped her through situations that would have broken either of us, but Gloria just stayed there, planted firmly on the edge, waiting for the next thing. I hugged her, gingerly, by way of consolation and greeting; she returned my hug with a force and solidity I wouldn't have thought possible.

"How you holding up?" I asked. Always the same – hugs and how-are-yous. Tragedy is nothing if not repetitive.

She shrugged. "I'm making it." She paused as Bailey came around to the foot of the bed, hugged her. "Thanks for making the drive up," she said.

"Well, I wish I could say we were here just as well-wishers, but --"

"You're on the case."

"Yeah."

She wiped away a few more tears. "Good."

We interviewed Kravitz alone, at his request; Gloria and Melanie went to grab an early lunch from the cafeteria, and Bailey and I took their seats at the side of Kravitz's bed. He made a point of staring away from us, but not so far that he couldn't still keep us in his peripheral vision; just far enough to communicate his disinterest. Bailey removed a pad and pen from her coat pocket; I removed mine from the chest pocket of my shirt. I prepared a page – Travis Boen, Fair Oaks Hospital, February 26 – and without looking I knew that Bailey was glancing over at me; I nodded slightly in response to a question she never asked, and in the strange way that only came from years of familiarity, we settled on an interview strategy.

Bailey settled back in her chair and spoke quietly and evenly, almost poetic in cadence: "Travis, I know you don't want to talk about it," she began, "but this isn't a thing that can be avoided, it's not a thing that goes away. He hurt you. He hurt your family, and your friends, and that stays. And all your silence does is keep all of that hurt underneath a surface, and that's going to kill you inside. And it's going to stop us from finding this guy and giving him what he earned when he broke the law, and assaulted you, and put you in this hospital bed. You don't have to give us the whole story if you don't want to, you can just give us a name, but give us something. Don't let this keep going the way it is."

"I don't remember." His response was immediate and robotic. It was fairly easy to see how the rest of it was going to play out.

"You don't remember what?" She asked.

"Anything."

"What's the last thing you do remember?"

Kravitz's iron gaze broke for a second, searched a bit, found a resting point. "I left school."

"What time?"

He thought about it for a few seconds, and then: "Four."

"Where were you going?"

"I don't remember."

She glanced over at me; my cue. We weren't exactly good cop / bad cop; more like carrot and stick. She coaxed, I pushed. "Your boss said you worked a four-to-nine at the Hardware store. You remember that?" I let a little derision into my voice.

He nodded. "Yeah, I guess."

Bailey's turn: "where'd you go from there?"

"I don't remember."

"Kravitz, I want to believe you – we both do – but you're not being very convincing right now. And that doesn't make a lot of sense to me, because if you were lying, you'd purposefully be trying to stop us from finding where, why and by whom you were beaten and left in the cold. And even if that were the case – which, again, I just don't get -- you'd only be stopping us for another, say, two days."

He looked over at me.

"We just have to find where your clothes are, or where your car is --" his eye widened at that one – "or maybe someone will tell us that they saw you or heard you. You don't do what was done to you without leaving a lot of evidence. A lot. I know we said we couldn't do this without you, but we are professionals, and we will if we have to."

"I always liked you, Officer Duncan."

That about broke my heart.

He rolled his eye to the ceiling and said, "I don't remember anything."

I nodded, closed my notebook.

I slept with my clothes on, sprawled out on top of the comforter; I dreamed about Kravitz and Melanie, about blood and bandages and scars. Somewhere in there Bailey and Dale showed up, but I don't remember where, or why. And then I was in my bedroom; Susan was staring at me, her face somewhere between confusion and contempt, her lips pursed and silent.

I woke up. The sun had gone down as I slept, leaving a few last strands of sunlight to trickle in through the floral-print curtains, barely enough to illuminate Susan, my wife, who stared at me with a mixture of pleasant apathy and boredom. It took my sleep-addled brain a few more seconds to join me, to remember what to say and what not to say, to try and shake the afterimage of her from my dream -- perplexed, contemptuous.

"Hey, honey," I said. My voice was gravelly and my mouth tasted like coffee.

"Hey." She sat on the bed next to me, smiling lightly -- a smile of comfort. "How was it?"

"He's beat up pretty bad."

"I'm sorry." She ran a hand through my hair for a few seconds. "How's Gloria

holding up?"

"About how you'd expect." I shrugged.

She shook her head. "First raising Travis on her own, now this... Not to mention her husband, the divorce."

"She's a strong woman."

"She's unbreakable. I don't know how she does it."

"No one does."

"How's Bailey?"

"Bailey's holding up okay," I said.

"Good," she said. "Good. I'm going to warm up the roast from last night, you want me to make you a plate?"

"I'm pretty tired."

She kissed me softly on the cheek. "Okay."

She left, went downstairs to warm her roast. She left the scent of her perfume, a faint impression on the comforter next to me, the sounds of footsteps on the creaking stairs and water running in the kitchen. Outside, the sun doggedly clung to the horizon, last vestiges of its light casting deep shadows in the already-dark room. I entered my dream and saw her again -- confused, angry, crying.

A few early snowflakes fell on us as we walked up the steps to the high school; it made the whole thing seem idyllic, like we were stopping in for a cup of hot cocoa instead of questioning a seventeen-year-old about the disappearance and beating of his best friend. We walked briskly -- partly to escape the cold, and partly to escape the irony.

I'd been there on a few occasions since I graduated; enough times to kill any sense

of nostalgia that threatened to flare up as we entered and made the short trip to the administrative offices. Some things still triggered memories; things that were new, things that were missing. But overall it just felt like another building, staying the same over decades, as generation after generation passed through it, left it, came back again.

I stopped us, just outside the office door. "You doing all right?" I asked her.

She nodded, looking at me, through me, past me. "Yeah."

"You've been quiet."

"So have you."

"Well, for you it's unusual."

She gave me the finger; she was fine. I opened the door.

A short, balding man in a too-wide tie jumped up from the edge of the secretary's desk and started talking at us before we'd even fully entered the room. "I tried to call the station, but the line was busy, and then I tried to call your cell phones but I couldn't find the card you left..." His face had already turned two different shades of crimson, and he looked for all the world like he might cry.

I retrieved a card from my coat pocket and handed it to him. "What's going on?" I asked.

"He's not here. Sheryl said he wasn't called in sick."

"You're talking about Ben?" Bailey asked. "Ben" was Ben Hardale, Kravitz's best friend and the purpose of the morning's visit.

"Yes, Ben." He looked from one of us to the other. "I don't know if that means anything, or..."

Bailey and I glanced at each other. It meant everything.

The Hardales lived on the southern edge of town, out where houses start to become acreages. The house was set back from the road a few hundred feet, accessible only via a long, wide driveway lined with twin mounds of dirtying snow. A thin layer of fresh snow covered the driveway; it was starting to come down harder now. We stepped carefully as we got out of the car.

The front door still had wreath on it, and a sign that said "God Bless This Home." I rang the doorbell; from inside, I could barely hear the sound of "Westminster Chimes." I waited fifteen seconds, and then I pushed it again. I waited thirty more seconds. Nothing.

"You hear that?" Bailey asked.

"Hear what?"

She stepped off the front landing, cutting through the snow-covered lining the front of the house. I followed, trailing by a few feet, stepping gingerly to avoid the rose bushes. We turned the corner, and I saw nothing; snow, bushes, vinyl siding. We walked until we were halfway around the house, and then I heard it: a plink, or a pop, a sudden burst of metal-on-metal. Bailey looked back at me, raised an eyebrow. I shrugged.

The wind gusted, hard enough to push the falling snow horizontal. I ducked my head into my collar and raised a hand to protect my eyes. When I looked up again, Bailey was further ahead of me, her hand hovering near her unbuttoned holster.

I wanted to call it an overreaction, but I'd seen an eighteen-year-old kid beat half to death and I still wasn't fully recovered. My hand moved on its own, found my holster, released the snap.

We stopped at the rear corner of the house, under one of the windows in the



screened-in porch.

We came around the back of the house, to the sprawling backyard; acre upon acre of clean white. Ben Hardale, dressed only jeans and a short-sleeve shirt, stood just beyond the back porch stairs with an aluminum bat in one hand and baseball in the other. Bailey and I stopped, watched as he tossed the ball in the air, followed it with his eyes as it rose and fell, and finally hammered it with a precise, vicious swing. *Plink*. The ball soared upward until we lost amidst the snow and the overcast sky. It landed a few hundred yards downfield, sending a tuft of snow flying, and then buried itself in the indistinguishable white.

Ben reached down for the bag of baseballs near his feet; he paused when he saw us, but only for a moment. He retrieved the ball and turned it over idly in his left hand.

"Mr. Duncan," he said. "Mrs. Bailey."

"Hey, Ben." I answered. "You're a little early for baseball season, eh?"

"Never too early," he said. He turned his eyes forward. Toss, swing, *plink*.

"Aren't you cold?" I asked.

"Nope." He grabbed another ball.

"Can we talk to you inside?"

"About Kravitz?" Toss, swing. *Whoosh*. The ball buried itself in the powder at his feet.

I nodded, then realized he was too busy looking for his baseball to notice. "Yes," I answered. "About Kravitz."

He retrieved, pulled it out of the snow barehanded. His hand was nearly purple from the cold, but there looked to be an area of deeper purple around the knuckles; one of

them had a gash on it, and looked like it might have split. I shot my eyes over to Bailey; she'd caught it too.

"We can talk out here," he said. "It shouldn't take that long. You just have to ask if I did it." He sniffed, wiped under his nose with the hand holding the ball. Toss, swing. Whoosh. He scowled at the ball, then at me. "And then I say yes, and then you go, 'why?'"

"We just --"

Bailey's phone went off in her coat pocket; two sharp beeps, the ring she used for calls coming from the station. She looked at me almost apologetically, then she pulled the phone out of her pocket and brought it to her ear. "Yeah," she answered. She walked a few steps upfield, enough to keep two conversations separate but not so that far she couldn't keep an eye on us.

"We just came here to talk," I told Ben.

"No," he said, "you came here to talk about Kravitz. And that means who, and that means why, and that..." His voice began to break toward the end of his sentence; he wiped under his eyes, then he tossed the ball in the air. Whoosh.

"Fuck!" he screamed, his anger sudden and total, a clean break from the stoic moodiness he'd displayed. He threw the bat downfield as far as he could; it landed fifty or so feet from us. He sat down heavily and buried his face in his palms. Thick clouds of white escaped from between his fingertips; the interval between them was short, and getting shorter.

"Ben," I said. "Ben, you need to breathe,"

For a while the only motion was his heaving chest, the only sounds his sobs and

the falling snow.

I walked over to him in short, careful steps, stopping a few feet outside of striking distance and sinking to my haunches. "Okay," I said. "Let's talk about why."

He took a few more explosive breaths before lifting his face. His eyes were puffy and red -- from crying, and probably from not sleeping -- and some combination of cold and inner turmoil had flushed the color from his face. It might have been the contrast of that pale skin against his dark hair that made me notice the sparse whiskers at his chin, the few ragged strands beneath his nose; I'd made my share of underage arrests, but this is the first time I'd had to talk to someone who was so clearly still a child.

"He came over," he sniffed, "and he wanted to go to the lake, and I thought, yeah, okay, let's play some hockey, or maybe... I don't know, it's Kravitz, I mean, he's been my friend since fucking second grade, so I thought we were going to do normal shit, right, the kind of shit we do. You know? And we were out there, and just sitting in the car, and... I think we were talking about the prom, and about Melanie, and then all of a sudden, he's..." He took a few, hyperventilating breaths and fresh tears sprung to his eyes.

"Stay calm Ben. Take your time."

"He's looking at me, like I'm some kind of... And then he's telling me about how much he's wanted me for years and years -- wanted me, that's what he said -- and what was I gonna do? I get out of the car. And he follows me, and he's saying he's sorry -- I mean, he's saying he's sorry -- and then he puts his hands on me, and he's close to me, and he's hugging me, and I don't remember, I really don't, what I did, or when, or why, I just remember he was on the ground and bleeding, and... And I couldn't stop thinking about the first time I met him, when we were kids..." He took a few breaths. And then I, I

left him. I took his car and I left him."

He sniffed. A thin layer of snow sat atop his like some perverted anointment; mine too, I'm sure. I had nothing to say.

"What's going to happen to me?" He asked

"I don't know."

"Am I --" he looked up, over my shoulder. I glanced back, and saw Bailey, and then saw Bailey's expression.

"What's up?"

"I just got off the phone with Gloria's lawyer and the Chief; they want the whole thing shut down, files closed, lips sealed." She shot daggers at Ben. "I think Kravitz is still trying to protect his friend," she said.

Ben's breathing began to pick up again; color found his face, and new tears brimmed at his eyelids.

I rose. "We'll talk to him," I told Ben. "Keep it together until we get back."

"Don't let him do it," he said.

"We'll talk to him. That's all we can do."

As we left the field, Bailey leaned in and asked: "what was that about?"

"Tell you on the way," I responded. I glanced back as we went around the corner of the house; through the driving snow I could see Ben, shivering in the cold as he walked out into the field to search for his bat.

"So we call it a hate crime," Bailey said, raising her voice to overpower the heater and the *flip-flapping* of the windshield wipers. She squinted through the windshield at the few bits of road visible through the snowfall, then threw a quick glance my way. "Take it

federal, let the state press charges."

I dialed the heater down a bit so we could talk at a normal volume. "They've been friends for a decade." I said. "We're not going to make the case that Ben's been a secret racist the whole time."

"Homophobia, not racism. From what you say, the case basically writes itself."

The car came around a curve, and we saw a half-mile of red lights stacked piled up a few hundred yards ahead of us. The car fishtailed a bit as Bailey braked, but she corrected deftly, and we rolled to a stop behind at the end of the line.

"Okay," I said, "but we'd still be going forward over the objections of Kravitz, his lawyer --"

"And possibly the chief, possibly the department, possibly the whole fucking town." She drummed her fingers on the steering wheel and glared at the brake lights in front of us. "Our job isn't to make everyone feel better. We put people like Ben in prison, keep him away from the rest of us. Maybe make the town a half-decent place to live in."

Traffic crawled forward, slowed, stopped again.

"It's what Kravitz wants, Bailey."

She went quiet for a moment; when I looked over, she was staring at me like she wasn't sure whether confusion or contempt was the appropriate response. "You're so fucking *calm* about all of it."

I turned my head toward the window so she wouldn't see the red start to creep into my cheeks, and shrugged with the shoulder still facing her. "There's a domestic every weekend," I said. "Charges get dropped nine times out of ten. Victim's prerogative." My breath fogged the glass, made things blurry.

"That doesn't piss you off?" She asked.

"Lots of things piss me off. Taxes piss me off, I'm not going to try and overthrow the government. We can't start punching holes in the system every time --"

"Oh, don't do that 'slippery slope' bullshit. Ben's guilty, you know it, I know it. If Kravitz wants to sweep that under a rug --"

I turned back toward her. "'Sweep it under a rug?' Bailey, he's trying to *stay in the closet*, maybe make it out of town without having to be the only black kid *and* the only gay kid. Jesus, let his life be normal for a bit."

"Life isn't normal," she said. Tendrils of red were visible in her neck and at the bottoms of her cheeks. She reached over and turned the heat back up to full blast.

I turned back to my window. Out beyond the glass I saw bits of metal and plastic on the shoulder of the road. We pulled forward; I saw a bumper, and then the car it had belonged to, hardly recognizable as such. The rear of it was crushed almost flat, and the front had all but separated from the car entirely. As we passed, picking up speed, I saw a man inside, bleeding from a wound on his head, trading words with the paramedic just outside his door. And sitting there, coming from Ben's field and heading toward Kravitz's hospital room, I couldn't help wondering if the man was asking for help or asking to be left alone.

We got to the hospital late in the afternoon; by then the worst of the storm was over, though the skies remained clouded, giving a white-grey cast to the light that remained. A few flakes of snow still fell, but softly, lazily, unsure of whether they wanted to land.

We made our way through the winding road leading to the hospital's Trauma/ICU

wing. Bailey parked us in the front row of a sparsely-populated parking lot. We gathered things wordless from the plastic bags we used to carry our supplies -- pens, notebook. Mine had a pocket reference on Iowa state law; Bailey's had a pocket New Testament. We loaded them our pockets and exited the car.

Bailey stopped just after she shut her car door; she stood there, looking at me over the roof of the car. She was frowning.

"Let's go," I said.

A few breaths escaped her, floated up, evaporated. "I told Dale," she responded.

The clouds, the snow underfoot, the thick grey light all seemed to insulate, maybe suffocate. They rendered my silence almost tangible. Like I was standing in a pool of it.

"Say something," she said. "Don't just..." she sighed.

"Why?" I asked.

She shrugged. Fair enough; I didn't actually care. "Why" had just seemed an appropriate thing to say.

"What did he say?"

She scoffed; a giant puff of white escaped her mouth, floated up, mingled with the overcast sky. "He said he was fucking one of the girls at the plant."

"I'm sorry," I said. In many way I was, and in many I wasn't. Two wrongs never made a right, but they put everyone on the same level. Pots and kettles, glass houses and stones. I felt the guilt that accompanies any relief you find in a friend's misery, but I felt relief in spite of it.

"Sorry?" She gave a smile that came nowhere close to reaching her eyes. "He's fucking her, I'm fucking you. It balances."

"We take a break, then. I mean, I could work on my marriage, you could work on yours..."

"Nothing's changed in my marriage. Dale still takes me to movies, he still sleeps with his arm around me, I still let him. He calls me 'honey' --"

I looked away. "Bailey, can we talk about this later?"

"-- and it sounds the same way it always sounded, and I can't tell if that's because he still means it or he never meant it. And what kind of choice is that, Mike? What kind of..." She sniffed; her eyes were moist. If it were anybody else, I'd have thought they were crying. With Bailey, I knew she was just getting cold.

"We should get inside," I said.

"You tell Susan yet?"

"No," I said.

"You going to?"

I shrugged. "She knows."

She laughed. "Figures, doesn't it?"

"The fuck does that mean?"

"Nothing," she said. She sniffed again, stuck her hands in her coat pockets. She came around the car and walked toward the hospital. "Nothing. Let's go talk to Kravitz."



## CHAPTER 6

### DESPAIR/DISCONTIGUOUS

He's left things in disarray: the clothes on the floor, two bowls, two spoons, three plates, a knife, a fork. None of it matters. He is alone. There's no one there to see. The loneliness -- it pours from him, like some element of himself. Like his own blood. It cuts him to the quick. The fan turns overhead. The silence covers everything. The house is quiet. He is quiet in the house.

There's no one there to see; it cuts him to the quick. The house is quiet, and he is quiet in the house. The silence like some element of himself -- his own blood. The fan turns overhead. Two bowls, two spoons, three plates, the clothes on the floor, a knife, a fork; he's left things in disarray. But none of it matters; he's alone. The loneliness -- it pours from him. It covers everything.

The loneliness, the silence. There's no one there to see. The house is quiet, and he is quiet in the house. The fan turns overhead -- like some element of himself. He's left things in disarray. It cuts him to the quick. The clothes on the floor, two bowls, two spoons, three plates, a knife, a fork, his own blood... none of it matters. He's alone. It pours from him. It covers everything.

A knife. It cuts him to the quick. His own blood -- it pours from him. It covers everything. The clothes on the floor, the loneliness, two bowls, two spoons, the silence, three plates, a fork. He has left things in disarray. Like some element of himself. None of

it matters; he is alone. The fan turns overhead. The house is quiet, and he is quiet in the house. There is no one there to see.

## CHAPTER 7

### TIMOTHY, WHO DESTROYS

Through the bedroom floor, the muffled sounds of a PG-13 war -- gunfire and explosions, without screaming, without pain. The occasional staccato chatter or burst of laughter in Allen's voice. Every so often the sounds quit out and it's just Allen talking, laughing, waiting for the game to begin again -- and it does, endlessly, until I lay aside any pretense of ignoring it and just listen to them: my boyfriend, the war.

I climb down off the bed and shut the bedroom door. I tiptoe -- feeling ridiculous the whole time, because there's next to no chance that he can hear me over the deafening sounds downstairs -- over to his side of the bed, to his nightstand with the drawer and the magazines stacked under it. I rifle first through the stack of magazines: two or three old workout magazines, a skin magazine, a handful of gaming magazines. In his nightstand drawer I find earplugs, a couple of books, an old mp3 player, some change.

I unplug his laptop from the wall and open it. The password is *ilovemybaby*, the same as every password he has -- a gesture of conciliation and openness after I caught him emailing some girl a few months back. I open his web browsers, the one he uses for business and the one he uses for porn. I walk back through his history -- The Linux forums and the news aggregators and the porn sites. I track back as far as a month in each browser -- and after everything, web pages and magazines and bits of minutiae in his nightstand, the man I reconstruct is startlingly, surprisingly, the same as the one I've

known and not known and know no better than I did when I started.

“Tim!” he calls through the floor. “Tim, come down here.”

I close the laptop, the nightstand drawer. I re-stack the magazines. I walk down to the den where my boyfriend sits on the floor in front of the massive television, his hands wrapped around a game controller, a comically oversized headset dangling from his neck. His head flicks back and forth between the doorway and the TV screen. “Come here,” he says.

“Why?”

“I need you to play for a second while I pee.”

I let a pause speak for itself, and then add to it: “I don’t know how.”

“*Please*, baby,” he says.

I walk over and crouch beside him. He pushes the right half of the controller into my right hand, eyeing the television the whole time. “Okay,” he says. “Index finger, trigger, thumb, X button.” He guides each finger to their place firmly. His hands are strong and soft and still surprise me. I nestle my head into his chest. He kisses me, then puts the other half of the controller in my left hand. “Thumb, thumbstick, index finger, left trigger. Good.” He points to the screen. I see a first-person view of a small room at the top of a stairwell, and a man’s hand -- *my* hand, apparently -- holds a device with a red flashing light, thumb poised over a button.

“Okay,” he says. “Easy-peasy. Anybody comes up that staircase,” he rests his thumb on my left thumb, presses the thumbstick left. On the screen the view pans leftward, revealing a doorway on the other side of the room. “Or if anybody comes through that door,” he continues, “pull the trigger.”

“Which one?”

“The right one.”

“I’ve told you how much I hate this game, right?”

“But you love me,” he says -- then kisses me, pulls the headset off his neck and onto my ears, and disappears up the stairs.

Through the headphones, ten or so voices, all young, some embarrassingly so. They say things like *got one* and *heads up* and *rolling to you* and every possible variation on the word *fuck*.

Someone says, *Rico, coming up*. A few seconds later, the same voice calls, *Rico, you got him?* I notice that the name on the lower-left corner of the TV screen says JohnnyRico42583; it was a name Allen was fond of, for reasons he’d tried to explain on multiple occasions. Before I can turn the thumbsticks or press whatever button or do anything at all, a man in red fatigues run through the door, points a black-barreled gun at me, and the controller vibrates in my hand. The screen goes red.

A line of text at the bottom reads, *JohnnyRico42583 was killed by \*\_CrimsonSlayer\_\**.

The voice from before says, *Rico, what the fuck?*

Another: *You fucking kidding me, Rico? One job. One job to do.*

Across the bottom of the screen I read: *MasterCommander92 was killed by \*\_CrimsonSlayer\_\*. xxDongkeyKongxx was killed by \*\_CrimsonSlayer\_\*. 1337n00b was killed by \*\_CrimsonSlayer\_\**.

*Rico, you fucking faggot.*

*Nice, dude. Nice.*

*Christ. Next time, guys. Try and stay awake, Rico, all right?*

I feel a hand on my head and I recoil, ducking, but it's only Allen taking the headset. He sits down next to me picks up the controller and thumbs a button in the center. "What happened, guys?" he says into the headset. He leans over to kiss my on the cheek, then looks back at the TV. "No, dude -- come on. I had to pee -- will you shut the fuck up for a second? I had to pee, so I gave the controller to my girlfriend. She --" He stops, laying a hand on my leg to stop me leaving, but I'm up anyway, past his whispered apologies and his ping-ponging glances between me and the TV. As I climb the stairs I can hear him talking into the headset again -- "You are, you fucker" -- and then he unmutes the television and the war starts up again.

He doesn't come to bed that night -- and when I wake up in the pulse-pounding dark I hear his snoring coming from downstairs. I think to go down there, if for no other reason than to take apart his effort to escape confrontation, but I instead I roll over onto his side of the bed, spread my legs, sprawl my arms, lay there a while. His side is cool and unspoiled. I lay there quietly for a while. I listen to him sleeping below.

At time I've loved him for his predisposition toward escape, toward letting his thin bluster fold under any kind of resistance. He cedes the bed in favor of the couch, cedes the couch in favor of the floor. He'll offer apologies before knowing the problem in its entirety, and he'll play dead when I lay into him, and after I spend myself, and apologize, he shifts back to normal like nothing else had ever been there. I used to think of it as a weakness -- and, okay, I still do -- but I can at least appreciate a weakness accepts itself, rather than one that feels the need to prove itself wrong with fists and vitriol. I've only ever loved weak men, but Allen is the first to afford me the decency of

keeping his weakness to himself.

Downstairs, the snoring stops. For a second I'm unsure of him: if he's simply rolled from his side onto his back, if he's gone to the kitchen for a nightcap, if he's headed up to apologize. I wait for anything. I hear the near-silent sounds of the TV starting up again.

Over breakfast, staring down into a bowl of fruit-flavored cereal, he apologizes.

"For calling me your girlfriend or for letting star-underscore-CrimsonSlayer-underscore-star call me a faggot?"

"Who?"

"Does it matter who?" I ask. "One of them. And I guess it wasn't me technically, he thought he was talking to you, calling *you* a faggot, but of course you disabused him of that notion right away when you told him about your girlfriend, so I'm sure he'll never accuse you of being a fucking faggot again."

"I'm sorry," he says. He stares into his bowl. If not for his cultivated stubble he could be a chastised five-year-old.

"*For which part?*" I ask.

"Both parts. I'm sorry."

"For what?"

"Both. Both. I said that already."

"'Both' isn't an answer. Neither of those things is the answer. The answer is whether you're comfortable enough with yourself to be with me."

"I'm not ashamed of you."

"I never said 'ashamed.' Who said 'ashamed?'"

“I’m sorry,” he says.

“You’re going to be late for work. Finish your cereal. And next time you’re at the market, maybe get something less fruity? You don’t want anybody to jump to any conclusions.”

“I’m sorry,” he says again.

“Leave,” I say.

I call in sick to work after he leaves. I rifle through his dresser drawers, his side of the closet. The shoeboxes where he keeps old Christmas cards, birthday cards, pictures of family and friends and, I’m sure, old lovers. I find a high school prom picture, Allen standing next to a little blonde, her all lace and frills and corsage and him smooth-cheeked and smiling, tips frosted, fingernails just so. I wonder if he took her to a hotel afterward. If he pretended to get too drunk or pretended to fall asleep or maybe if he really fucked her, grit his teeth and made it happen, and told his high school friends the next day.

They’re holding hands. Her neck is flushed. I put the picture in my pocket and replace the shoeboxes as they were. Before I leave the bedroom I open the drawer to his nightstand, pull out two of the three books he’s working on, and move the bookmarks a few pages forward. In the kitchen I scrub his cereal bowl until I score lines in the ceramic.

*My girlfriend*, he says.

Downstairs in the den -- *his room*, he calls it, and backs it up with the framed piece of construction paper on the wall with “Timothy Stay Out!” written in intentionally sloppy crayon scrawl. The sign was my idea; the frame was my gift to him, as was the



room.

I turn on the TV, turn on the game console. I slide the headset over my ears. I sit in the spot he'd sat in last night and pick up the controller he'd left in the middle of the floor. Left thumb, thumbstick. Right thumb, X button. On screen, the game rolls through opening credits before settling on an image of a squad of squad of soldiers walking down the middle of a highway, ruined hulks of cars all around them. *JSOC*, the title reads, *Special Warfare*.

After a few wrong turns in the on-screen menu I stumble across the *network play* option and I'm prompted for a password. I select the letters one-by-one on the on-screen keyboard: *i-l-o-v-e-m-y-b-a-b-y*. It fails.

I try: *Ilovemybaby*. *ILoveMyBaby*. *ILOVEMYBABY*. *ilovemybaby42583*. *ilovemybabytimothy*. I try to remember his ex-girlfriends' names. *ilovemybabychristie*. *ilovemybabyalex*. *ilovemybabyjenni*. I try *ricoluv83*, his old email password, and *icorayuvlay83*. I wonder if he's trying to spite me, so I try *fuckyou* and *fuckyoutimothy*.

My phone chirps from inside my pocket -- two short chirps and a long one, Allen's text tone. I retrieve it, check the message.

*r u playing jsoc?*

I glance at the screen, back at the phone. I check the corners of the room for cameras. I check the doorway for some kind of sensor. He'd told me once about a camera you could plug into a laptop that would track intruders based on motion and send you text messages or call the police depending on how you set it up. I tried to find it once and the closest I came was a website called *spytoys* that sold \$400 gadgets for what it called "entertainment purposes only." I wouldn't put it past him.

I text back: *Why?*

*it sends me txts if someone trys 2 access my acct more than 10 times. r u trying 2 play?*

*No.*

*its ok if u r*

*I'm not.*

*ill tell u the pw*

I think on that one a bit. *It's not the one we agreed on?*

*the pw is ricoranger83 if u want 2 play. u might like it, its fun :)*

*I thought we agreed on a password.*

*ill change it 2nite*

*I can change it right now, if you want.*

After a while, he sends back: *ok*

I pick up the controller again, exit the network play menu -- but then, the password change option is probably in the network play menu, so I re-enter it, enter the password letter-by-letter, and find myself in a whole new set of menus, “deathmatch” and “team deathmatch” and “assault” and “flashpoint,” nothing that looks like “settings” or “options” or a “tools” menu. And I imagine Allen sitting in his cubicle, laughing at the idea of my unfamiliarity, the aggressive overconfidence in my offer to change the password. I can imagine him coming home, asking *what did you change the password to?* and pretending to mean it, or maybe meaning it entirely, because there's so little space between guile and guilelessness with him, because he wears sincerity like a mask.

I shut down the game, put the controller between the couch cushions and hand the

headset on the door knob. I go up to the office and remove his prom picture from my pocket and run it through the shredder.

His parents came over for dinner once, just after we'd started living together. They brought two bottles of wine, a red and a white, because they didn't know what we'd be serving and they figured better safe than sorry. They told me how glad they were to meet me. Allen smiling his kindergarten smile. They told me how glad they were that their son had found someone.

The last time they came by was for his birthday, last year. They talked less and smiled less and looked at me like they couldn't quite focus their eyes on me. After that they only ever called, and when they called Allen would take the phone into another room and speak in whispers. And after he finished I would go hold his hand and ask him if he wanted to talk, and when he did talk he'd tell me how poorly they thought of me and I'd tell him how little they respected his life choices. After a little while they tried to introduce him to a boy from his father's office and we decided he'd stop taking their calls.

After he comes home, he kisses me three times, asks me about my day, and I hold my lips still and tell him *fine, yours?* and look elsewhere while he responds. When he goes down to his room I wait for him to come back up and ask me where the controller is, where the headphones are; but after a minute or so the game's theme music filters up through the floor as he adjusts the volume back from where I left it, and I realize he won't be coming up again. So I grab my laptop and a magazine and carry them down.

The sound, at ground level, is practically tactile; when the gloved hands on the

screen lift a machine gun to fire off a burst of bullets I feel each explosion in my teeth. Allen laughs, and only now do I realize how loud it has to be to compete with the amalgam of noise coming through the TV. I sit down next to him, not four feet from the TV, and open my laptop on my lap, clenching my jaw against the noise.

He asks me something.

I point to my ear, raise the hand in defeat.

He turns the volume down. “Did you come down here to play,” he repeats. He raises his eyebrows and looks back at the TV, turning the gun and the disembodied arms through a doorway, firing. I can’t tell if it’s an offer or a challenge.

“I did,” I say. “You said you thought I might like it.”

He smiles, but something about it is forced, and I know I’ve called his bluff. He crumbles, like he does, and fingers the button in the middle of his controller. “I gotta go, guys,” he says. He listens for a while. “Yeah. Yeah. Tomorrow, maybe.” He laughs. “Why don’t you come over here and try it?” he asks, but he smiles when he says it and then it’s buddy-buddy and goodbyes.

He takes a spare controller from the entertainment center, lays it in my hands. “You remember the hand position?”

Fingers, triggers, thumbs, thumbstick and button. I lift my hands to show him.

He smiles. His hands twist and press the controller and the menus on the screen fly by until the game starts up, the view split down the middle, his character on the left, mine on the right. He shows me: *left-stick-move-right-stick-pivot-left-trigger-grenade-right-trigger-fire-x-button-reload-y-button-cycle-weapon-z-button-shoulder-fire*. We go through them, one at a time. When I’m far enough along, we play.

He lets me win. His shots are deliberately slow and poorly aimed, and I would be offended if not for the backward flop of his blue-suited warrior when my return fire hits home, the satisfying thump of the controller when I pull the trigger. After four or five straight kills, I ask him, “How many until the game’s over?”

And he says, “It’s practice mode.”

“Practice mode.”

“It doesn’t keep score, you just go until you want to stop.”

“You want to stop?” I ask.

He shrugs. We keep going.

I pad down the stairs in the dark, my eyes not yet fully adjusted, my hand trailing along the wall just to be sure of something. I find him by the sound of his snoring and I kneel beside the couch and wait for my eyes to adjust. When they do I can only see his outline, curves and angles. Broad shoulder rising and falling. Cheekbone tilting up and back with the rhythm of his breathing.

“Allen,” I say.

He wakes. “Tim? What are you --” he reaches out blindly, and I let his hand find my face. “Jesus Christ, baby, you’re sweating like crazy. Did you sleep? Did you have the dream?”

In ‘The Dream’ my ex-boyfriend of six years traps me in a corner and counts down from ten, lingering on *two: two, two, two, two, two...* I ask, “Do you still talk to your old girlfriends?”

“No. You can check my email, check my phone.”

“Do you ever want to?”

“I don’t.”

“Do you ever wonder?”

“I really don’t, baby. I swear.”

“If you ever leave me,” I hear myself saying.

“I won’t.”

“I’ll kill myself.”

“Don’t say that, baby. I won’t leave you.”

I run my fingers over his neck and go. I’m halfway back up the stairs before I remember. I walk back down, stick my head through the doorway. “Allen?”

“Yeah, baby.”

“Your prom picture.”

“What?”

“*Your prom picture.*”

“Okay, baby,” he says. “Okay.”

Both sides of the bed are empty, cool. I roll from one to the other. I don’t want to sleep. I should go back downstairs. I should turn the game on and we should play -- real mode, for points. And he won’t let me win this time. He’ll aim and shoot like he means it, and so will I, and we won’t stop until someone loses.

## CHAPTER 8

### VALHALLA

By Autumn our war had made of the wild field something unrecognizable: craters overlapping, some atop each other, filled or half-filled with rainwater and viscera - as if we had ripped open the ground in haphazard search of something and when we failed to find it we poured ourselves out to fill the empty spaces and to hide our shame. In the unscathed places things grew green and wild and died spectacular deaths when the war touched them with boots and shellbursts and hordes of metal. And every day the sky shone we could see across the field to where the enemy had dug in, planted wire and bags of sand and scored lines in the ground to fill with the bodies of the living. And every day the sky shone we could see the places where we had left our own dead.

I took to making sketches of the field. Charcoal and angles, everything in densities of black. When the men found them they bound me at the hands and feet and beat me with the tamer ends of their rifles. I spent the night in the infirm tent. I claimed shellshock and my lieutenant called me a coward. He sent me back to the forward trenches the next day, just before the evening stand-to, before I was fully well.

Like all the men I pointed the wild end of my rifle forward. Like all the men but one I kept my head below the level of the trenches. When the sniper touched the unlucky one he made no noise. He soaked into the ground at the bottom of the trenches, which by now accepted dirt and blood as equal variation on its own theme. None of us moved in

sympathy or in surprise. The enemy hailed dirt and mud on us with their shells and they streamed out of the smoke and the twilight murk and they hacked and leapt at our barbed wire. We met them with our machine guns and our flamethrowers and our rifles. Those newest to the forward line stayed in the trenches and the rest of us leapt free to meet the enemy at eye level. We killed and were killed. By darkfall most of the screaming wounded had died.

My lieutenant sent me out with the medical detail to collect the wounded. We blacked our faces with trench filth and snuck out onto the ruined battlefield without torches or moon or stars to guide us. We found the wounded by the sound of their moaning. We put knives in them to stop their noise and left their bodies for the burial detail. When we heard no more moaning we sat in the dark, backs pressed against each other, and said nothing.

In the morning we stood in our crooked lines and waited for the enemy's attack. Their artillery reached out to the field in front of us and made it over. They touched our first and second lines and sealed the unlucky ones alive or dead in their trenches. When the echoed drumbeats of their guns had ceased our own gunnery men launched shells into the morning mist to ward off the enemy's advance and to relieve their nerves and for the fun of it. Our scopeman told us when the mist began to pink around the edges and we raised our rifles over the edges of the trench and fired into the bleeding white, our riflecracks barely audible against the fullbore of the artillery and the chattering machine guns. When the enemy emerged out of the mist they came covered in the red of their own compatriots, faces blank as ours. They fired their rifles and tore themselves on our newly-spoiled barbed wire and ran at us until we could impale them on our bayonets, until we



could open their bodies with our trench spades. And like the evening and the morning of the day before we ran out to meet them, to kill them with our hands if necessary. As they retreated we followed them with mortars, opened holes in them and in the earth indiscriminately.

Afterward we paused for breakfast; tinned ham and coffee made of water whose origins we didn't care to know. While we ate we kept our heads below the trench line for fear of the long touch of the enemy's snipers. Because we feared their reach and vision under the open sky the daylight would admit no preparations, and because the daylight admitted no preparations we sat on the firesteps and amused ourselves in what ways we had left. I tried a dreamless sleep and failed. I thought to write a letter or a journal in my breastpocket notebook but my charcoals were too blunt for lettering and I found myself sketching again. Not from any will to be an artist or a recordkeeper and not from any want of words. Shapes and outlines of things that had burned over my vision like flash blindness or a second set of eyes. The men stared hard at me and I bore their hatred and their insults. One came close to me and I cut him with my knife. The remainder overwhelmed me and overlapped new bruises atop the old ones.

In the infirm tent I laid amid the incomplete, the bled, the amputated, the blinded. I made no claim of shellshock and received no sympathy from the orderlies or my commanding officers. The repaired of us were taken away and the newly damaged were brought in and I felt nothing like myself among either of them. In the evening I expected no new wounded to be received and we received none.

I coughed up pale yellow fluid for a day or two and when the worst of that was over they sent me back. The bruises on my face still throbbing, my right eye partly closed

from swelling. The company had taken my charcoals and my notebook and I had to leave the forward trenches to find someone who would trade me another. I slogged through the trenchmud at the bottom of our defiladed lines in search of a traverse. If I had lost myself in the zig-zag of the trenches I could not have known it. If the world had ceased to exist beyond the next bend in our crooked line I could not have known it. I slipped between the men in their idle times, sleeping, staring. When I came to a place where yesterday the enemy's artillery had struck and collapsed our line I found the trench newly dug, as if no men had ever lived and died there save for the rifle butts and soldier's boots poking through the dirt of the otherwise flush walls. When I came to a new collapse I found upchurned dirt and wooden supports all piled together and laid across our clean lines, helmets and bayonets poking out from the surface of the mound. Like the earth had been enlisted, wore our uniforms, bore our weapons. I vaulted clear of the trench and ran hunched to the point where the line continued again. The enemy snipers reached out three times and touched me not once.

I found the traverse and followed it back to the gunnery lines. I didn't recognize the men or their soapsmell or the way their mouths half-curved toward unintended smiles. They patted me on the back and called me *mate* like we were veterans already of the same battle. They offered me sips from their flasks and undented packs of cigarettes which I used for trade in place of my own malformed packages. They offered me their soap and shaving cream and razors and the use of their washtroughs. They asked me for numbers -- the distance to the forward lines, the number of our own men killed by splashback from our mortars. I asked them how to tell our groundbursts from the enemy's and they laughed again. They said: *you've got a wit left, yet*. As I left they reached out to

me with their unoccluded sentiment but they left no tangible mark on me save for their twenty folded sheets of paper tucked into my breastpocket and two of their gunner's pencils and one remaining pack of their cigarettes.

Returning to my forward lines I again found the collapsed trench wall obstructing my path and I paused there for want of nerves. I might have stayed until the evening stand to when we and the enemy tried again to bury each other or until the unlit night when our men feared no sniper's touch and came with sharpened spades to cut through earth and bone and soldier's canvas to re-establish the trench line. I didn't stay. When I had nerves I crawled out of the trench on my belly to the other side of the obstruction. A sniper touched the ground near my head and splashed dirt on my face and I rolled sideways to dive into the trench. The ground received me with its sucking hollow plop and I stayed there and covered my head for fear and added my own water to the trenchmud. The men on the firesteps beside me gave me no bother.

I returned to my line in the hour before evening stand to. To pass the time I took the pencils and the paper out of my breastpocket and sat without drawing anything and wondered which vision had closed its eyes. Not from any lack of will to be an artist and a recordkeeper and not from any want of imagery. When they called for stand to I returned the empty pages to my pocket and took up my rifle and watched for the advance.

## CHAPTER 9

### JOE, FLYING LOW AND CIRCLING

Shortly after he died, Jack Johnson (who'd always had a bit of a silver tongue, really) talked Death into extra stop on the way to the afterlife. "I'd like to say goodbye to my friend Joe Louis," Jack had explained, and Death – who was apparently too busy with the dead to have noticed that Jack and Joe had never actually been friends, despite both of them being relatively successful colored boxers – agreed. So, on a late spring night in 1946, Jack Johnson and Death stood in the bedroom of a well-appointed New York penthouse and waited until Joe Louis -- the Brown Bomber, poster boy for the second world war, vanquisher of Nazi strongmen and general credit to the negro race – woke up, saw the two of them standing there, and promptly pissed himself.

"Oh, God," Joe said. "Am I going to hell?"

Jack couldn't help himself; he busted out laughing, bending double at the waist.

"I've been so good," Joe said. "I was on God's side."

Jack was rolling on the floor by now. He ought to quit, he knew, since Death was almost certainly going to figure the whole thing out pretty soon, but it was all so damn *funny*.

"What's he doing here?" Joe asked.

*You're not friends?* intoned Death. Perplexed. Utterly hilarious.

"Not at all," Joe said. Indignant. A laugh riot.

Thus ended the ruse. Death, so cool and even-handed when he'd stopped by Jack's hospital bed, now moved with the roughness and imprecision of a scorned child – grabbing Jack roughly by the collar of his shirt, dragging him along as reality collapsed around them and they entered the netherworld. Jack laughing the whole way. Roaring. Like it was a goddamned circus.

Nine days later Joe Louis knocked out Billy Conn under the lights of Yankee Stadium. A right hook to the jaw in the middle of the eighth round. At thirty-two years old, his form was as clean as it ever was: toe, ankle, calf, knee, thigh, hip, torso, shoulder, tricep, elbow, forearm, wrist, *fist*; push-pivot-twist-extend-pull-connect. Textbook punch; frame it, sell it. The Brown Bomber, flying missions over New York City.

He made over half a million for the fight – more than he'd ever made, more than any other colored fighter could have pulled. Not that the distinction mattered – his management took a cut, his ex took a cut, the *state* took a cut, and the rest went to pay down old debts, loans for businesses that had seemed like good ideas at the time – the insurance company, the law firm, the soft drink (Joe Louis Punch, get it?), and the IRS.

He owed a mountain of debt to the IRS. Hundreds of thousands, the interest on it ticking up with the vicious regularity of a mafia operation. He'd asked his tax lawyer if he could get some sort of credit for donations he'd made over the years: money raised for the war effort, war bonds purchased, time spent entertaining the troops. He paid the government back for the welfare his family had received, did they know that? Did they have any record of that? But apparently their math only went negative, digging holes deeper and deeper, with Louis at the bottom.

Never let it be said that Joe Louis wasn't a man who paid his debts.

Death and taxes, as the saying went, and the thought of it made him think of Death and Jack Johnson standing over his bed, too real to be a dream – a visitation of some sort, maybe a warning, but then all Jack had done was laugh, and what kind of warning was that? Some sort of joke, some prank?

And why Joe Louis, of all people? Joe only knew Jack by reputation – the terror of the boxing world in the 1910s, dashing Great White Hope after Great White Hope, talking big, living bigger, fast cars and white women and more bad press than you could read in your whole life. Jack Johnson was the reason colored fighters couldn't get title matches in the early thirties; even after Joe's management had made him into the Anti-Jack, made him live modestly and fight clean, it took years of negotiation to get him into the ring with Braddock – or, maybe more appropriately, into the ring with Braddock and the shadow of Jack Johnson, all three of them duking it out, what a showdown. He knocked out Braddock in the eighth; Johnson stuck around for a few more years, until Joe got into the ring with the Nazi champion and knocked him out in the first round. Jack stayed down after that, and Joe Louis's victories started being celebrated outside Harlem. Then came the war, and the recruitment efforts, and... And Billy Conn, now, knocked out by a clean punch from an American hero.

I'm Joe Louis, damn it. I beat you, Jack. No rematch. You stay away from me.

Jack came back five years later. On furlough from the afterlife – the “Death” incident had gotten him into some trouble, sure, but he took the angle that Joe needed him, that their last visit had been rendered useless by Jack's (admittedly ill-advised) fit of laughter, and now it was his responsibility to go and correct his error. Noble intentions.

God, he was good with words. Seriously, he should have been a politician.

He showed up mid-October, 1951, same deal as before – standing over Joe’s bed until he woke up. Joe kept his composure, this time; if anything, he looked annoyed.

“Leave me alone, Jack.”

Jack smiled, pure reflex. For the longest time he’d only smiled; he kept everything else bottled up until he reached the ring and he had free license to uncork every bit of hatred he’d had to swallow since the last he fought. It worked like a charm -- got him to the top, fight after fight, payday after payday. Things got messy, though, the higher he climbed. Too much to keep inside, too much to swallow. He couldn’t keep a cork on it. He started lashing out, beating his wife... She killed herself, revolver to the temple, in the late summer of 1912. Blamed him for it – not that she had to, he would have blamed himself if she hadn’t. After that, he still kept everything inside, but what came out was never quite as much as what had gone in. It started leaking, apparently, into the rest of him. Slow poison. He lost his championship, fell from the top. Life goes on.

He’d run into his ex-wife in the underworld. He said hi; she broke down crying. He smiled then, like he was smiling now, and pushed it inside and let it seep into the rest of him. God, he’d have thought all the pain ended after death.

“Why the hostility, Joe?” he asked.

“You leave me alone.”

“Come on, now.” He sat on the edge of Joe’s bed. “You gonna hate me too?”

“I never hated you, Jack,” Joe said, “but you sure as shit didn’t make things easy on me.”

Jack smiled. “Language, Joe. Don’t let them microphones catch you talking like that.”

“Fuck you.”

Jack smiled bigger.

“What are you doing here?”

Jack thought of Joe Louis pissing the bed five years earlier – *what is he doing here, am I going to hell?* – and he had to fight hard not to laugh. “I wanted to tell you something.”

“So spill it.”

“I want you to take it serious, though. I ain’t messing around now.”

“Fine, Jack.”

“You think I ever earned respect?”

“You were going to tell me something, not ask me.”

“Just answer, so I can keep going. The question’s mostly rhetorical; you’re supposed to say ‘no,’ and I --”

“No. No, I don’t think you ever earned respect.”

“Right, you say no, and then I tell you that I agree. I ain’t earned a thing.” He paused for dramatic effect, ever the showman. “I stole it.”

“Stole it?”

But now, here’s what I’m trying to tell you.”

“What’s that?”

“You ain’t earned it either. You borrowed it.”

“I beat the Nazis, Jack. You don’t call that earning?”

“You think that’s all it takes,” Jack said, “then you ain’t beat shit.”

Just over a week later, on the night of October 26th, a crowd of 17,421 (puny by



Joe Louis standards, he'd pulled 70,000 before) watched as Joe caught Rocky Marciano's left hook square on the chin, fell face up onto the canvas, and started counting the lights on the ceiling of Madison Square Garden. The crowd roaring the whole while – "roaring" was Joe's word, the first one that came to mind, not cheering or booing or yelling or bellowing, *roaring*, like jungle cats at the zoo. The referee hovered near the edges of Joe's vision, and by the time Joe turned his head to see the count -- he couldn't hear it, the crowd was so loud -- the ref was holding up two fingers, already drawing his fist back to put up three. Plenty of time left.

Joe rolled his head back, started looking at the lights again -- a grid of halogen bulbs, point after point of light. He thought of stars -- he thought, *I'm seeing stars, how hard did he hit me?* and then someone stepped into view overhead, backlit by the lights, positively *angelic*; for a second Joe thought *Oh God, don't let it be Jack Johnson again*, and then the figure resolved into someone entirely different, and Joe had to wonder if he really had gone punch-drunk -- because he was looking at none other than himself, Private Joe Louis, clad in full army kit, boots to canted helmet, half-gone Lucky Strike between his teeth, rifle in hand, bayonet at the ready. Ready for the posters, ready for the tours and the charity bouts and the recruitment films with their hackneyed dialogue:

*What's your job, son?*

*Fightin', sir, and bring on them Japs.*

"What are you doing down there?" Private Joe asked him. He even *sounded* heroic. "Ain't the kind of fightin' gonna beat the Nazis."

"Nazis are beat, Private Joe."

"Whoever, then." Private Joe took a long drag, but his cigarette stayed the same

length. And of course it did -- he was an American hero and his cigarettes stayed as long as he wanted them to. "You been living clean?" he asked.

"What?"

"Living clean. You drinking? Drugs?"

"You know me better than that, Private Joe."

"White women? Flashy cars? Making the papers for anything ain't boxing or winning wars?"

"A bit of a debt problem at the moment," old Joe said.

Private Joe frowned; somewhere in America an eagle fell out of the sky. "Paying them back, I hope."

"As best I can, yeah."

Private Joe smiled. Flags flapped in crisp autumn winds, eagles soared, bombs burst in air. "Then you'll win," he said, "because you're on God's side."

He disappeared -- off for tea with Uncle Sam, no doubt -- and left not so much as a trace of his cigarette smoke to obscure the lights of Madison Square Garden. The referee counted seven, and old Joe Louis -- feeling very much like "old" Joe Louis, a Brown Bomber low on fuel, creaking at the joints, flying low and slow -- rose to his feet and walked to the corner.

The referee met him there. He said something -- Joe didn't know what, he still couldn't hear him, but it couldn't have been any different than anything any other referee has ever said, are-you-okay-do-you-want-to-keep-going-can-you-still-fight, and Joe, practically on automatic pilot, nodded his head, slackened his expression, and tried his best to look like someone clear of mind and ready to win.

The referee walked back out into the middle of the ring, raised his hands, and the fight was on again.

Marciano came out of the opposite corner, hands low and wide, head cocked to the right. Joe came out to meet him, stopping just the range of Marciano's jab, not wanting to get caught by another left hand -- the man's jab hit like a cannonball, and Joe didn't even have the words to describe the punches that came after that.

Joe reached out with his jab, fell short. Reached out again, caught Marciano on the chin, and the man shrugged it off like breaking waves. Like nothing Joe'd ever seen before. Marciano took punches sometimes, just *took* them, and hit back with those goddamn cannonball hands of his like nothing had ever happened, like he'd just finished breakfast. They called him "The Rock," for gods' sakes, the heavyweight champion of the world, never beaten, never tied.

Another Louis jab, ignored. They were circling, still, but Marciano was closing the circle, moving it off its axis, sending Joe toward the corner. Joe stepped sideways, putting his back toward the ropes instead of the corner, but Marciano stepped in front of him and to the left, closing his only route of escape. To the corner now, to the ropes, or to The Rock; Joe had no other options.

Hell with it. He'd come to fight. Come to win, actually, but there was no winning now; whatever Marciano was made of, it was impervious to Joe Louis. But whatever Joe Louis was made of never cared about "impervious," never cared about age, never cared about futility.

What's your job, old man?

Fightin'. Bring on the champ.

Louis came out and jabbed. Marciano slipped the jab easily, came back up, counterpunched.

The crowd roared so loud Joe thought the roof might cave in. He stumbled backward into the ropes. The world went *smeary*. He felt something hit his ribs -- a cannonball, a lower order of ammunition -- and the pain registered even through the fuzziness in his head. Another punch, another hook to the head, and the smeary world went sideways and Joe went with it, off his feet and over the ropes, onto the Garden floor.

The crowd went completely silent. Abruptly, not a gradual die-down of noise -- one second the bestial roar of the jungle, the next second complete silence. Joe looked out at them -- even through his blurry eyes he could see them moving, jumping, raising their arms, covering their eyes. Still raucous.

Oh God, Joe thought. I've gone deaf.

*No*, said God, *you haven't*.

God?

*One and the same*.

*The* God?

*None other*.

What are you doing here?

*Omnipresence*.

Did you come for the fight?

*Omnipresence, son*.

Oh.

In the ring, the referee was holding up fingers -- four, now five, now six.

God?

*Still here.*

Can I ask you something?

*Sure.*

I'm on your side, right?

A pause. *I don't have sides, Joe.*

Physically, you mean? Like another omnipresence thing, or –

*Physically, metaphorically, metaphysically. No such thing as being “beside” something in three-dimensional space; there's only proximity, really, and even then you've got universal expansion, you've got equal and opposite reactions, chaos theories, butterflies flapping their wings in Rio de Janeiro – a lot of it isn't going to make sense to you, but the bottom line is this: things drift together, things drift apart, and if it ever seemed like anything was on the side of anything then it was mostly because they hadn't had the time to separate yet.*

Care to run that by me again, God?

*No time, Joe.*

Joe looked back at the ring; the referee was holding up ten, Rocky Marciano was holding up his arms, the crowd was jumping and screaming noiselessly.

God, Joe Louis said.

*Yeah.*

Whose side am I on, then?

## CHAPTER 10

### CLARENCE, BEHIND GLASS

The boys passing by outside in chunky coats and snowpants, man-size shovels resting on their shoulders or dragging on the ground behind them. The faint outlines of the hinges of their knees and elbows, the tufts of wild hair escaping from beneath stocking caps, the fatty curves of their cheeks. The awkward tumble of their trot as they walked by his house, refusing him even the courtesy of a glance, let alone a visit, or the offer of their services: *shovel your drive for ten dollars*. Fog drifted from his mouth to the windowglass, spreading itself there in white haze of frost, obscuring the white haze of the road, the snowdrifts, the dancing flurries. Making indistinctions of the boys, hazes of blue-gray-purple, fading. He reached a hand up to wipe away the frost. His hand left a brief outline, trails of condensing water.

His neighbors on both sides had already cleared their drives and sidewalks with snowthrowers, carving straight-line paths through the snow that ended at his property line in perfect, cliff-face verticals. Even the Butch Woman across the street had been out in the morning in unlaced boots and a man's jacket, wielding her shovel like a plow, tossing snow over her shoulder in cascades. A fitful night of sleep and an early ache in his joints had robbed him of even that, left him in a chair by the window, watching for boys passing by. Hoping that they might do something about the unfiled sheaf of white that was his yard. Hoping they might turn it into something that didn't look like it ought to

belong to a shut-in, an invalid, a pariah.

The boys stopped at the only other unshoveled driveway on the street. They trudged up toward the front stoop through snow that came halfway to their knees, their steps strange and angled, stork-like. They pressed the buzzer and shifted leg to leg in the cold. One of them leaned in toward the another's ear, white smoke rising from the space between them, clouds billowing up from both as they laughed. Finally the house's owner -- Lieberman or Seversen or Stewartson -- came to the door, slacks-and-sweater-vest-and-tie. They talked a moment, gesturing toward the driveway, and then Seversen went back into the house and the boys took their shovels in both hands and started clearing off the stoop.

He sipped tepid coffee. In the corner of the room the muted television ran through the closures and cancellations for the day. The boy had not been by to deliver the paper that morning so he was left to look through yesterday's obituaries: two old men, one of whom he'd known. An old woman he hadn't cared for. Two towns to the north, a drunk driver and her victim, both young, both described as loving, vibrant, blameless. Months prior he'd gone to calling hours for a young man he'd known, well into middle age now, whose wife had stared past him until he reached the coffin, the body, the empty thing in the casket that had looked like a bad approximation of the boy he'd known. Like someone had tried to mold him out of clay from a blurred picture; too little in the cheeks, too much beneath the eyes and chin. He'd stared at him until the wife cleared her throat and the funeral director came and told him that he needed to make space for the other visitors. Beyond that no one else had spoken to him.

The boys down the street took the snow in layers, lifting it in awkward, bottom-

out squats and tossing it over their shoulders. They had the endless energy of young men, taking no pauses, working without slowing. Energy enough that they might finish and still have enough left in them to shovel Clarence's driveway -- it was barely wide enough for two cars, and regardless he would come out to help them, work with them, lighten their loads. Beyond that he'd add payment -- twenty dollars to each of them, twenty-five if they worked well. Hot chocolate afterward if they wanted; a treat, a kindness, a thank-you. Or he might pay them thirty dollars. He had no idea what the going rate was, but surely thirty dollars apiece would be enough to buy whatever it was that boys their age were interested in. A video game, a movie ticket. A short date with whatever girls they had their eyes on, if boys at that age even had their eyes on girls yet.

Clarence groaned as he stood up; he'd been in the chair since early morning, except for coffee and to use the restroom, and his joints had settled, gathered inertia. His took his plate and cup to the kitchen, laid them in the sink with last night's dishes. Through the window he saw the backyard untouched, immaculate. He gripped the handrail on the way up the stairs, knuckles throbbing.

He undressed at the foot of his bed, haltingly and in pieces, like some titillating revelation of himself. His slippers, his socks, his fleece shirt, his sweatpants. Beneath them his skin was dry and nearly hairless, gathered in small folds at his joints and abdomen, sagging. He pressed at it, felt it give under his fingers, little indentations from his yellowed fingernails. His bones felt thick and brittle like porcelain.

There were days when he couldn't help but feel like something loose and wheeled and rolling downhill, each day building on the last day's speed, a little faster, faster. The acceleration untenable, his body disintegrating under the speed. And he might reach out



for something to slow him or to put him on a more predictable course, but things passed by so quickly and so many of them were headed away from him.

He put on slacks and a button-up and a thin sweater. He put on socks and loafers and the watch they'd given him when he left the office. In the mirror over his dresser he looked like something generic, bland. He'd yet to shave but doubted he'd have time before the boys finished with Seversen's driveway. There were worse things to be than generic, bland, and unshaven.

When he returned to his chair in the living room the boys were three-quarters of the way through Seversen's driveway, leaning on their shovels and talking. Little blue-collars, little construction men. He smiled. Thirty would do, he decided. Enough to have the boys going back to school the next day or whenever they decided to open the schools again, holding crisp bills. *Mr. Leahy, they would say, shoveled his own drive alongside us and he paid us thirty bucks each besides. Afterwards we sat in his house and drank hot chocolate. And then we thanked him. We thanked him, and we left.*

The boys were nearly done now, clearing the last of the snow from the end of the driveway, pushing a little out into the street so that the snowplow wouldn't block the drive when it went by.

Thorough of them, Clarence thought. Professional. When they finished they did something at the end of the driveway, a handshake or a five or something, and then they slung their shovels over their shoulders and sauntered back up the driveway like cowboys. Seversen came out, to pay them. They spoke a little while -- Seversen looking out over their work, Clarence imagined, commenting on their quality -- and then, as if on impulse, Seversen reached out to brush the snow off of one of the boy's caps.

Seversen went back inside, the boys down the driveway. Smiling. Tucking money into their snowsuits.

Clarence stood, smoothed the front of his pants. He wondered if he should just go out onto his front stoop, wave for them as they walked back, offer something casual: *I see you're out shoveling drives?* He reached up to adjust his tie and his fingers found nothing. A tie would have been better, he thought, I should have put on a tie and shaved, but the boys were already going and he had no time for worries now. He reached for his wallet, retrieved it, counted out his money.

When he looked up again the boys were at the end of Seversen's driveway, looking down the street toward him -- *at him*, he thought, directly into the window where he sat with his breath fogging up the glass -- and then they turned and walked the opposite direction, to the corner, around the corner, away.

Hester's fingers combed through the plastic blocks, pushing them aside in search of others - a wheel for a lunar rover, an antenna for a spaceship. His grandmother gave him a new set of blocks every Christmas and birthday, always a robot or a spaceship or something else he liked, as if to counteract the plainer sets (firemen, policemen, sometimes old frontier men and women with plain brown clothes painted over their torsos) that his mother bought him whenever she decided to celebrate a holiday he'd never heard of: Ramadan, Kwanzaa. His fingers riffled through fire-engine red and Old West brown until he found something black and neon green. He picked the piece out carefully, pinched between thumb and stubby forefinger, and set it with the others beside him.

He had almost enough to build... Something. A starfighter, if he could find

another glossy black wing, or a laboratory if he borrowed pieces from a police station set. He could build a NASA command center, maybe -- blues and whites and men with ties sitting around computers. He could perform space shuttle launches until lunchtime. He thought on it, then shrugged in half-hearted agreement with himself. He grabbed a half-completed police building and began to disassemble it, prising apart its pieces and setting them on his opposite side.

He had his command center half-done when his mother called him the first time, the mainframe all but complete, with a cluster of smaller computers around it. He stuck his hand in the middle of the pile of loose blocks and pushed, stirred, loud enough for her to hear them through the walls. He stirred them up a few more times, then went back to building.

“Did you hear me calling?” His mother’s voice behind him. He turned, saw her standing on the next-to-last stair with one hand on her hip, uncut fingernails digging into the waistline of her khaki pants. Her eyes scanning the room from behind thick-rimmed glasses -- touching on him, his blocks, the toy chest in the corner.

“Were you calling?” He asked.

She stepped down onto the floor and walked toward him, barefoot, toes painted blue and chipping near the edges, stepping between sharp bricks stuck into the carpet. She sank down into her heels until she was close to eye level and he could smell the sharp scent of her soap, see the sudden dimples in her nose and her eyebrows where she used to put rings and metal, things she only ever put in her ears anymore.

“Hester,” she said. Voice quiet, serious. “Look at me.”

He knew that if he didn’t meet her eyes it would give him away -- but he had

learned to unfocus his eyes, stare through her, and if he did it right she might still think he was looking at her, honest and unafraid.

“Did you,” she said, “hear me calling.”

“No.”

“Hester.” She sighed, pressed her lips together in a line.

“What?” He’d let his voice raise, and his worry over that made him focus his eyes, look at her expression. He looked down at the half-completed structure on the floor beside him.

“That’s twice now,” she said.

“Twice what?”

“You know what. I don’t want to have to ask you again.”

He frowned at the ground. “I heard you,” he said.

When he looked up again she was shaking her head. “I know,” she said, and stood. “Go upstairs, get your snow clothes on, and go help Mr. Clarence shovel his driveway. He’s out there by himself.”

He got up one leg at a time. “I’m sorry,” he said.

“Get up there.”

He looked back at her, unsmiling. Ahead of him the steps were steep enough that he could lean forward and lay his palms a few stairs ahead of where his feet touched and climb up like a bear. He leaned a bit from side to side, as though he carried a bear’s weight, as though he were unused to walking upright. Halfway up the stairs he looked back again to see if he had broken her seriousness -- and he had, she was smiling a little bit, even though when she saw him looking she let the smile deflate like a balloon. But

still he'd seen it and it was enough to lift him. He walked the remaining stairs upright.

Upstairs he put on dark blue snowpants over his pajamas, sat down on the floor to slide his boots over the ends of his feet. He stood to stamp the boots firmly into place, then sat again to tie them, looping end around end, leaning his whole body back to pull the bow tight. His mother came upstairs to help him into his coat and gloves. She slid his hat down over his eyes as she put it on. He laughed.

"Are you going to go with me?" He asked her as he stopped at the door to the garage.

"I was going to, before you lied to me."

"I'm sorry," he said again.

"I know. Go on." She opened the door for him, slapped the big lit-up button on the wall that raised the garage door up. She called at him over the hum of the garage door opener as he walked down the stairs to the garage floor: "You can take some money if he gives it to you, but don't ask him."

"Okay."

"I mean it," she said.

He grabbed a shovel from the bucket in the corner where his mother kept them stacked handle-down and dragged it behind him as he walked out into the white world -- the snow in the sides of their driveway piled nearly as high as his chest, and higher than his head down where it met the street. A snowplow scraped by, yellow light turning, blazing. His boots left little crosses and diamonds and squares in the light dusting that covered the drive. He drew in a sharp breath, pictured snow crystals blossoming at the back of his tongue and the opening of his throat -- then blew out, making an O with his

lips, trying to make a smoke ring like he'd seen in cartoons but only managing a thin cloud that curled and disappeared in the wind.

Across the street Mr. Clarence looked up, waved a leather-gloved hand. Hester looked back at his mother; she waved back at Mr. Clarence and brushed her hand forward as if to shoo Hester across the street. He waved to her. She waved back, shooed again. He stepped out into the street.

In his driveway, Mr. Clarence waved again, and smiled.

"I'm not supposed to ask you for money," the boy told him. Hester, his name was -- a girl's name, the boy had said as much, but Clarence had told him that the name was lovely all the same. He regretted the choice of "lovely," thinking perhaps he should have said something more masculine, more suited to the boy's obvious compliment-baiting, but he'd meant it when he said it, and intended it to be a compliment. It was a lovely name.

"Why not?" He asked the boy. He stood straight for a moment to catch his breath. His lower back pulsed, swollen, and the effort to keep his face neutral was nearly as taxing as the effort of moving the snow.

The boy said, "I'm not supposed to be rude."

"Do you think it's rude to ask for money?"

"I don't know."

"Do you want money?"

Hester's cheeks pinked -- embarrassment, or exertion, or just the cold. He rubbed his bottom lip across his top row of baby teeth and gaps and a few budding adult teeth. Well cared-for, Clarence thought, a credit to the boy's mother. The boy started to answer,

paused, then said, "I don't think I'm supposed to say."

He smiled. "That's probably the right answer."

The boy smiled back, unsure.

"Still," he continued, "I can tell you this: there were other boys, a little older than you, that had no problem asking for money to shovel driveways."

The boy's expression was inscrutable -- envy or excitement or perturbation.

"Who?" He asked.

"I didn't ask their names."

"Oh." He gnawed his lip again. "Did you think they were rude?"

How they'd passed by him. How they'd gone out of their way to avoid him.

"Well," he said, "I didn't give them any of my money, if that tells you anything. Sixty dollars, I'd set aside."

The boy's eyes widened, their corners creeping in a suppressed smile. His hands, small and mittened, squeezed the shovel tighter.

"What would you do with sixty dollars?"

"I don't know. That's a lot."

"Maybe you can think about it," Clarence said, "and tell me later."

Hester smiled fully, said, "Okay," and went back to shoveling, their short break apparently over. The boy's form was not as refined as the boys from before -- he bent too much at the waist and too little at the knees, which would have been tiring for even a fit young man, let alone one as doughy, albeit slightly, as Hester. But Clarence was tiring quickly himself, his knees and ankles feeling as though they might burst and his shoulder tightening where they met his neck, so he had little room to criticize. And even if he had,

he wouldn't have -- the boy's company was a rare pleasure, one not to take lightly or to ruin. He joined the boy in scooping snow away.

The boy asked, "Why are you dressed so nice?"

He flushed a little. "I don't have snowpants," He answered.

"You should buy some, maybe, if you have sixty dollars."

"But then what would I give you?" He winked.

The boy shrugged. "Are those khaki pants?"

"They're wool."

"My mom likes to wear khaki pants." The boy wiped under his nose, looking back across the street.

Clarence looked too. The Butch Woman had been watching from the windows earlier, short-cropped blonde hair standing out against the darkness inside of the house, but he didn't see her now. "She seems like a nice woman," he told the boy.

"She's okay."

"You think so now," he said. "Wait until you're older. You appreciate your mother more and more the older you get."

"How old are you?"

"I'm seventy-four," he said. "Do you believe that?"

"Yeah," the boy said.

He laughed in spite of himself. They reached the end of the driveway, started on the sidewalks. Between the chunking scrapes of their shovels he could hear the wind, the swish of the boy's snowpants as they plunged forward. Each sound full, present, like the clouds and the snow and the surrounding houses had cloistered the two of them away,



alone, together.

“A telescope,” the boy said. “With sixty dollars. I think I’d get a telescope.”

“A good telescope will cost you more than that. A hundred dollars, at least, maybe two hundred.”

“Are you going to give me a hundred dollars?”

Had he been this unsubtle at the boy’s age? “Not today. But if you keep coming over when it snows to shovel my driveway, I can give you some more money each time.”

“I will,” the boy said.

They cleared the sidewalk as he’d seen the boys doing earlier. A thin line down the middle, then the two of the scooping in opposite directions, back to back, master and apprentice. The boy looked tired as they finished the sidewalk on the left of the driveway, escaped strands of dark brown hair stuck to his forehead with sweat. Clarence reached out to brush a few strands aside, tuck them back underneath the boy’s cap. He could feel the boy’s warmth even through his gloves. He could imagine how the steam would roil off the boy if he swept the cap from his head, how the air would bend and fog around him.

The boy was staring at him.

“I don’t want you catching cold,” he said. He drew back his hand, hung it dumbly by his side.

The boy nodded, and they began the other side in agonizing silence.

“Maybe seventy-five,” Clarence said.

“Really?” He could hear the boy’s smile without seeing it, and the space between them shrank down again.

“Maybe.”

“Are you rich or something?”

He laughed. “Not nearly.”

What do you do for your job?”

“I used to be dentist.”

“A dentist.”

“I always liked teeth. My mother had very nice teeth.”

“My mom says I have nice teeth.”

“You do,” Clarence said.

They reach the end of the sidewalk, pushed shovels through the thin wall of snow that separated their portion of the sidewalk from the clean lines of the neighbors’ portion.

“Are we done now?” The boy asked.

“Would you like to be?”

The boy shrugged. “I can help more if you want.”

Clarence patted the boy on the back once, twice. “You’re very kind,” he said.

The Butch Woman was not in her windows. He coughed from a twinge in his chest. He plucked the glove from his right hand, one finger at a time, and let the air blow cool over the warm red in the meat of his hand. He grabbed the boy’s shoulder so his thumb gripped where the chest met the shoulder muscle and his fingers spread out across the blade on the boy’s back. He squeezed, tenderly, felt the give the boy’s muscle and the flex of his bones. He fought for control of his expression and the blanching of his face and the rise and fall of his stomach, churning. He let go and slid his hand back into his glove, flexing his fingers into their individual places.

“What was that for?” the boy asked. The slight bend inward of his eyebrows.

“Just a way of saying thanks you.”

They'd been gone the last time she'd looked, but the last time she'd looked hadn't been that long ago. The driveway and the sidewalks were clear, so she figured they were inside, Hester trying to think of a way to ask for money without asking for it and Mr. Clarence trying to pull him into a conversation about grandkids or whatever war he was old enough to have been in (Korea?) while writing out a check for five dollars or some other unconscionably low amount. But at least Hester would be learning something about social interaction, or respect for one's elders, or in general *doing the right thing* -- whatever vague impulse toward morality had led her to send him over in the first place. It wasn't that he needed a male role model - his father, passive-aggressive though he was, would have been a fine role model, and no doubt was now for his current wife and her kid and the kid they were working on. No, Hester needed a role model of *any* sort, and the world was so full of bad ones: movies, television, video games, her own family. She did what she could, an idealized version of herself that didn't lie and had no interest in violence or cursing or treating anybody unfairly -- but god help them both if her authority ever crumbled under the weight of its own irony, its own pretension.

She rolled her chair back from the window, sat staring into the laptop balanced on her legs. She busied herself with work email, problems that had answers, clear issues that she could respond to in one- or two-sentence answers and not worry about after that. Her phone buzzed -- a text message from a too-young husband she'd met up with a few times, something about how he hoped she was staying warm, how willing he was to help her if she needed. She texted him back. *ha ha*, and tossed the phone aside. She rolled back to

the window, looked out at the empty driveway across the street.

So the two of them were inside, still, and Hester was probably sucking down stale peppermints, trying to smile through Mr. Clarence's fifth story. Or maybe they'd made friends, and were bonding over whatever it was that made old men bond with young ones. Maybe Mr. Clarence could teach Hester something about manners and chivalry that she couldn't. Maybe Hester would come home with a smile and a five-dollar check and an appreciation for the world beyond the walls of his playroom. Or maybe Mr. Clarence was a misogynist, or a racist, and Hester would come back across the street asking what the n-word meant.

Or anything, really. Some part of her wanted to leap across the street, tear the door down and demand an answer, and another part thought about what that would say to her son, or say about her, and another part said *let kids be kids* and still another part admitted what the other two wouldn't -- that it didn't know and couldn't tell her. Her mother had told her that she wouldn't know worry until she had a child of her own, but she'd neglected to mention that this worry would be total, and she'd spend as much time worrying over Hester as she did worrying over whether she could ever be the right thing.

Back across the street, the driveway still empty, her son still nowhere to be seen. And Alex, unsure of who she ought to fear more -- the old man, her son, herself.

They'd been in the backyard for what felt like an hour; first Mr. Clarence had tried to build a snowman with snow that wouldn't stick, and then he'd thrown a feathery snowball at him and Hester had to smile and say it was okay. He already had forty dollars tucked into the chest pocket of his snowpants, and Mr. Clarence had promised him the remaining thirty-five, along with a mug of hot chocolate, after they were done -- but he

hadn't said anything about when that might be, and in the meantime they were lying beside each other, their arms and legs carving angels into the snow. And Mr. Clarence kept talking the whole time, and Hester, at nearly the limit of his patience, had to keep answering with "oh" and "yes" and "no" and "I don't know."

*You have such nice teeth.*

Oh.

*Do you like to play games?*

Yes.

*I did when I was your age. Maybe we can play games together sometime.*

Okay.

*I had a wife and a little son like you. When I was much younger. I don't tell a lot of people that.*

Oh.

And so on. Enough to earn his thirty-five dollars, at least. And when he got home and his mother asked him about how he made so much money, he'd tell her, *I earned it*, and if she laughed he would tell her the rest of the story.

"Hester," Mr. Clarence said.

"Yes."

"Were you listening?"

"I was looking at the sky."

Mr. Clarence laughed. "Not much to see up there," he said, "without your telescope."

"I guess not."

Mr. Clarence rolled up onto one side and Hester could hear him groan and see him sitting halfway up out of the corner of his eye. He reached for Hester's hand and he avoided it for a second, pretending he was still making snow angels, but then he remembered the money he had yet to make. He let the old man take his hand and he tried not to feel strange about it, hoping there weren't any neighbors who could see.

"I want to ask you something," the old man said, "but it has to be a secret. You understand secrets?"

He shrugged.

"It comes with another secret -- a secret hundred dollars. You don't have to tell anyone about the money, not your mother, not anyone, and I won't tell anyone about it and we won't tell anyone about the secret either. Does that sound okay?"

It didn't sound okay, which surprised him. He had secrets, he kept secrets for his mother and for his friend at school, but neither of them had ever tried to pay him. He didn't know what a hundred-dollar secret was like, but he knew it would be something bad -- a murder, a robbery. Hester had forty dollars already, and that was enough -- not for a telescope, but maybe for Legos and some books. He could leave now -- run through the open gate or climb over the fence if Mr. Clarence tried to stop him. He didn't know why Mr. Clarence would try to stop him but he planned for it all the same.

"Maybe later," he said.

"I might not want to ask you later."

"That's okay."

The old man didn't say anything for a while.

"Are you sad?" Hester asked.

“A little sad, yes.”

He thought about it for a while. What the right thing to do might be. He said, “I guess you can tell me.”

His mother’s voice came from close by, behind him. “Hester,” she said. “Get up.”

He sat up and turned around and she was there, at the fence, in a jacket and no gloves and no hat, looking like she only ever looked when he was in trouble, when she seemed like something else besides a mother. Her eyes going between him and Mr. Clarence. “I was about to come home,” he said.

“Go home now. Wait for me.”

“I wasn’t doing anything.”

“*Hester.*” And there was barely any mother left now, just something with bared teeth and fingers like claws. He got up, not caring whether he disturbed his snow angel or not, hot tears gathering at the bottoms of his eyes. He trudged toward the open gate.

“Now,” she said, and the tears fell free and he ran, jumping from foot to foot in knee-deep snow, crying for fear and relief and because people never stayed the way they started.

He told the Butch Woman, “I didn’t mean to scare you.”

“Stay away from my son.” Her eyes were green and hazel and when she glared at him like that, her jaw firm and the color rising up in her neck, she looked almost pretty.

He gestured toward the boy’s snow angel, to the one he sat in now. “We were only playing, miss, nothing sinister. I know you want to protect him, and I can see now how this looks, but -- to be honest, when I was growing up, we didn’t think about things like that.”

She pulled something from underneath her coat -- a knife, curved and wicked-looking -- and took a few steps into the back yard, stopping well out of his reach. Her fingers long and strong and gripping the handle white-knuckled. Strands of short blond waving in the breeze like tall grass. The lines around her mouth bending downward, her lips pressed together, sealing shut her teeth. The pit of his stomach opened. Things inside him rose and fell. How small her snowblind pupils. How bright the rest of her eyes.

“You’re beautiful,” he said. “Both of you, just... beautiful.”

“I’m calling the police.” She stalked away from him, arms crossed over her chest, kicking the snow up in great tufts ahead of her.

And he leaned back, spread his arms and legs, brought them together. He wondered what the two snow angels would have looked like if Hester could have finished his. He wondered how they would have looked together. How they would have accompanied each other. What they might have meant.



## CHAPTER 11

### SUHA, ANIMA, DESAPARECIDA

Before the Mother steps into the shower she sees redochre spots on the inside of her panties - her cycle not a minute late, and as she scrubs herself in the shower she tries to make nothing of it. By the time she is finished fresh blood is stained around the open of her thighs, thinned by showerwater, smeared by her drying towel, and excitement runs in electric orbits in the center of her chest. In the bedroom she finds Walter sitting on the edge of the bed, buttoning his shortsleeve, and she can't help but think how he glows, like a creator, like a god, and the possibilities consume her. When he steps off the bed with tie in hand to have her tie it for him he sees the expression on her face and asks her: What's got you so smiley?

Probably nothing.

Come on, out with it.

The smile tugs at her mouth. I'm on time.

That's good, Walter says. That's good, right?

It's not anything yet.

Okay. Okay.

I just don't want to jinx it.

Okay.

While he is at work she lays her hand on her stomach, tries vainly to feel for the

empty space there -- it would be only a few thousand cells wide, she's read, perhaps a little spot the size of a pea, a miniature black hole, eating away at the edges of her womb. She feels it, she thinks. She is sure. Not with her fingers but with her soul, her sense-beyond-sense: an emptiness there.

Days later she walks out of the bathroom with red eyes and smile and a clear vial of liquid. Negative, she says. And Walter says, Are you sure? And the Mother laughs. Clear is negative. I'm sure. I read the instructions three times. And Walter jumps up from the couch, throws both hands in the air, yells something unrestrained and guttural. He runs to her, stopping as if struck at the edges of her personal space, so as not to run into her, not to damage her or her womb or the nothing that grows there, that might one day come out of there, if they can keep it.

In the mornings she is not sick. In the evenings her feet do not swell. She has no strange dreams or dreams of any kind. She has no cravings but she eats anyway, pancakes by the half-dozen, to keep the space inside her from pulling her stomach inward. Still she is unable to maintain her weight and she and her husband run out to the Woolworth to buy clothes that all have some variation on the words "expecting" or "soon-to-be." In the evenings Walter lays his head on her stomach and listens in the spaces between her heartbeat for the high-pitched whine of his own eardrums or the oceansound of an empty seashell. When she feels it pull at her she lifts her shirt up over the thin flesh of her stomach so that Walter can watch the little space sink in, stick his fingers in it down to the first knuckle and say, Hi there, little guy.

They question what to name it. There are no names of foremothers that will do because their foremothers were all brought into the world screaming and alive. They

struggle for words. They open thesauri and baby name books. *Loss, lost, disappear, emptiness, nothing*. Absentia. Suha. Anima. Desaparecida. They flip coins. They play rock-paper-scissors. They argue and do not speak for days.

In the weeks before her due date her stomach has sunk so far she can feel her spine through it. Her face is an outline of her skull. In the mornings she sees herself and she calls out to Walter, I look like death. I look like an inversion. I look like the letter C. And when Walter calls back to her to tell her that she looks beautiful, that she glows, she wishes mildly that she could feel something in response to his words but in her system there is a near-nullity of dopamine and endorphins and estrogen and progesterone and she cannot manage to feel anything.

She mutters to herself: I do not glow. I take in light. Absorb it.

Her delivery is unremarkable and painless. They put the fleshless twigs of her legs in stirrups and tell her not to tense up or to push -- it will come when it's ready, they say, it will slip right out. And when it does arrive she hardly notices; one moment Walter and a cluster of greenclad hospital staff are gathered around the open of her legs, the next her doctor is standing over her, cradling an impeccable absence, so small he does not even need to part his hands to carry it. Walter kisses her on her forehead and tells her he loves her and leaves to find a phone, to share their news.

The doctor lets her hold it before they have to take it away. She lays it against her chest. It is temperate and weightless and it makes no noise.

She says, I don't feel anything.

The doctor says, That's to be expected.

And then he takes it from her. She watches as he walks away, and sometime

between the point where he's leaving and the point where he's left she knows what she can name it. Feels it on the tip of her tongue.

When Walter walks back in she tells him, I know what to name it.

Walter asks, name what?

She doesn't know.

The doctor returns with a bubblegum cigar for Walter and a cup of ice water for her. She tells the doctor: I don't remember what I'm doing here.

The doctor says: Imagine, though, if you did.

## CHAPTER 12

### BRIAN, SARAH, BROKEN

When he came home she was standing in the kitchen in flip-flops and cutoff sweatpants and a bra, leaning over the sink with a cigarette halfway to her lips, and the look on her face made unnecessary whatever he might have said, if he could have said anything. And then she shrugged with one side of her mouth, took a drag, tapped ash down the sink, blew smoke out the open window. She finished the cigarette while he hung up his coat, and then she found him in the living room, kissed him quickly, tasting of ash and tar. She offered, by way of an apology: “I thought you’d be out later.”

He sat down on the couch. “They were going to the Nineteenth Hole. I wasn’t really up for it.”

She sat down next to him, nestled into him, kissed him again. “You should have been out later,” she said. “I was going to surprise you.”

“With what?”

“It’s too late,” she said. “The surprise is ruined.”

But she’d only ever tried to surprise him in one way -- the first time back in high school, when her parents were gone and he’d gone over to their house and she answered the door in a pinstripe bra and panty set. The outfits changed every now and again, mostly whenever she had a chance to get out to the outlet mall, but the essence was always the same, and he’d never minded. “Well,” he said, “I could leave and come back.”

“You don’t want to leave,” she said.

“I don’t?”

“I think you want to stay here.”

“I do.”

“You do.” She laid a hand on his thigh as she stood up. “Stay here.”

She skipped a little as she walked to the stairs, flip-flops clapping, taking the stairs by twos. He heard her heavy heelstrikes in the hallway, in the bedroom, in the bathroom. Water coursing through the pipes as she ran the sink. He imagined her applying makeup in the bathroom mirror. He thought of her again in the doorway of her childhood home, framed by pale yellow, flushing: *Surprised?*

She came down the stairs one at a time, so he could watch as she drifted out of the stairwell with bare feet and bare legs and the rest of her barely covered by a low-cut red shift that made the most of her. She stopped just outside the stairwell, crossed one leg in front of the other, laid a hand on the wall and used the other to crook her index finger at him, like something from a 1940s-pin-up.

He rose from the couch and let her take him by the hand up the stairs, staring at the exposed parts of her back, the swivel of her hips. She took him past the closed door just before their bedroom and he barely noticed the hitch in her step, more cognizant of the hitch in his own. She pulled him into the bedroom before he had recovered and then the entanglement of her arms and the wet press of her mouth and the taste of cigarettes.

She was loud, the way she never could be at her parents’ house, the way she never could be with their baby sleeping in the next room over, the way she only ever was in hotels and the scant nights they’d had alone. She clutched at his arms and his back,

grabbed him by the ears and told him, *tell me you want me*, and his first instinct was to quiet her, put a finger to his lips and point at the wall that separated their bedroom from hers. He set the impulse aside. He told her he wanted her, told her he loved her. Quietly, still, so as not to wake the baby, so as not to wake the baby.

When he awoke she was up already, chewing the end of her thumb with lip-covered teeth, looking out the window, or at the TV in front of the window. Pale skin set against the rumpled red shift, against the faded yellow sheets, against the morning faintly glowing inside the walls. She laid a hand on his pillow, walked her fingers over until she found his neck, down until she found his shoulder. She squeezed twice. “Are you getting up now?”

He looked over at the clock; three minutes after eight. “Did you shut off the alarm?” he asked.

“I didn’t feel like hearing the noise.” She pulled her lips back, dragged her thumbnail between her front two teeth.

“One of us is going to be late.”

She shook her head. “I’m staying home.”

He sat up straighter, searched her. “Are you feeling alright?”

She nodded. “You should stay home too.”

“We can’t both skip work.”

She looked over at him, her eyes close to smiling. “We *shouldn’t*,” she said. “But we *can* stay here, have another surprise, maybe get something to eat, or go see a movie --”

“Both of which cost money.”

“-- or go to a park, or just stay here and drink and fuck and play video games all day, I don’t care. I just don’t want to go into work, and it’d be better if you were here too.”

“I will if you need me to. Do you need me to?”

“You should if you want to.”

“I do want to. Today, I do. Next week I’ll wish I hadn’t because we’ll need the money.”

She sighed. “Can we do something when you get home?”

“I don’t know,” he said. “Is the drink-fuck-video game thing still on the table?”

She laughed in spite of both of them, and leaned over to lay her head at the point between his stomach and his chest. He slid his fingers through curls of red. Years back it had been his head on her stomach, her fingers in his hair, her laughing and him smiling and listening for a second heartbeat inside her. *Do you hear it yet?* she’d asked him.

*I think so. How do you know it’s there?*

*I can feel it.*

*Really?*

*Yeah.*

*What’s it feel like?*

And then the swollen empty of the room next to them.

He kissed her head once, tilted away from her until she lifted and withdrew. “I need to get going,” he said.

When he came back from the shower she was gone, their bed still unmade, rumpled where they’d lain. For a second or two he tried to discern their shapes in the



sheets, tried to form an outline of their bodies, but there was only creased fabric and empty space and he was already running late. The sun rose higher, made the morning light harder.

When he came downstairs she was in the kitchen, leaned up against the sink, smoking. Facing inside this time, blowing cigarette smoke into the kitchen, letting it drift into the living room and settle into the carpet, the couch cushions. “See you tonight?” She asked.

“You know I’d stay if I could.”

“I know,” she said. She raised the cigarette to her lips and the end of it glowed orange. “See you tonight?”

“I could come home at lunch.”

“I’ll be here.”

He stopped for gas at a station with walls made of sand-colored brick and pumps that won’t let him do anything until he’d put in a credit card or paid at the counter. He tried his card for the novelty of it, and then again after it was declined. When the second attempt failed he went into the station and pre-paid five dollars to a high-school-aged boy at the checkout kiosk who stared at him in a way that had become familiar. He asked the boy if there was a phone he could use, and the boy squinted at him, rocked his head back in a reverse nod, and pointed out the window. “Pay phone out there,” he said. “You need change?”

“I’ve got it.”

“Wait,” the boy said before he can turn to go. “Did you go to school with my brother?”

He cracked a small-world smile. “Probably,” he said. “Who’s your brother?”

“Jim Wood. They called him --”

“Doughnut?”

Jim Wood’s brother smiled. “Yeah.”

“I knew him. What’s he up to?”

“Fixing cars out Lakeport way, but he might as well be here for as much as he comes back.”

“Tell him I said hey, will you?”

“Yeah,” the boy said. “Yeah. You’re Brian Denclau, right?”

And this would be something unrelated to high school or Jim Wood or cars out in Lakeport. “Yeah, that’s me.”

Jim Wood’s brother nodded. “You were in the paper,” he said. “You and Sarah Miller, about your daughter. Man, that was... I don’t know. Can’t say anything that really gets at it. I don’t know if they ever found her --”

“No.”

The clerk shook his head. “Kind of shit makes you believe in the death penalty.”

“They never found her,” he said. Somewhere south of genuine. “She might be okay.”

The clerk’s face went slack in sections -- mouth, eyes, forehead. “I shouldn’t have said anything.”

“It’s all right. We appreciate all the support.”

“Yeah, but... Fuck, I’m an idiot sometimes. Look, we’ve got a phone behind the counter, you can use that if you want to.”

“It’s all right.” Brian pointed his thumb out the window, toward his car. “I’m guessing I’m good to go?”

“I’m really sorry,” the clerk called as he left.

“No need.”

Of the headlines in the papers at the height of it all, the one he recalled most clearly read *Community Comes Together Around Missing Girl’s Family*; the word *around* had stuck with him, how it implied that they were inside the community, surrounded by it instead of a constituent part. He’d told this to Sarah. She’d said it was better to be surrounded by friends than something unfamiliar.

He stood by the car, watching the numbers on the gas pump tick upward, trying not to make eye contact with the clerk staring at him through the window. When he was done he went to the pay phone and dropped a quarter in and dialed his supervisor to tell him he’d be late.

Sarah had called his office twice, his supervisor told him. Wanted him to call her when he got in.

Did she say why?

She didn’t.

He dropped another quarter in the pay phone and dialed home. It rang six times before the machine picked up and two happier-sounding people told him that he’d reached Brian and Sarah. He hung up before the third voice, high-pitched and not yet confident in its *ells* and *arrs*, could tell him that he’d reached Hailey too.

There were things they hadn’t changed -- the answering machine, Hailey’s bedroom. In the broader world they would tell him that he to let things go; they make it

sound like ashes in the wind, like all there would be to do was to open his hand and let the wind take everything from him, and if he shed a tear it would be as much for the loss of the thing as it would be for the beauty of it all, the relief and the release. But he held on to things as big as he was, and the wind was stronger than them both, and in truth he was never sure which one of them the wind would take. So he held on, with both hands, and when the broader world told him to let go he wished things on them he'd never wished on anyone before.

The clerk waved at him as he left. He almost waved back, but he didn't think the clerk would understand it, the acidity of the intention. He left the wave unreturned, and imagined that the boy was still waving as Brian pulled onto the street, the exit, the interstate.

It was fifteen minutes from the interstate to the office, and he wondered if Sarah would pick up the phone the next time he called -- if maybe she'd been in the bathroom when he tried to call the first time, or if she let the phone ring through because she hadn't recognized the number on caller ID. He wasn't worried -- he'd come to terms with powerlessness -- but that didn't stop him from being aware of the possibilities, and from thinking through what he might do if she didn't pick up when he called the next time. Who he would call and ask to stop by their house to check on her. Whether he had the vacation time necessary to sit with her in the hospital, if it came to that.

The car behind him -- a red Sunfire, like Sarah's -- began to encroach on his bumper. He tapped the brake twice. The driver behind him honked once, and Brian rolled down the window to wave him around. The driver honked again. Brian turned the wave into a middle finger, held it there as he tapped the brake and let the car coast, slowing,

until the driver behind him had to pull up beside him. He checked the road once, then leaned his head out just enough so that the wind wouldn't blind or deafen him. He ran through all the epithets he knew, trying to pick one, trying to combine them into new ones, until he saw the crucifix hanging from the Sunfire's mirror and the Geoff Jenkins bobblehead on the dashboard and Sarah's hair floating in the wind and Sarah's face looking at him, eyes red-rimmed, motioning him to pull over.

She pulled off onto the shoulder a few hundred feet ahead of him. She had her car door open before he'd stopped, and she was already running at him by the time he'd unbuckled his seatbelt. Screaming something he couldn't hear over the radio and the roar of passing cars. He opened the door, went out to meet her -- yelling for her to be careful, yelling that he couldn't hear her, and then a semi passed and the ensuing lull in traffic he could finally make out what she was saying: *she's alive, they found her, she's alive* -- and he stopped, still, and then she was on him, hugging, kissing, smelling of cigarettes and yesterday's clothes.

They left his car on the roadside to pick up later, or never. Neither seemed to matter at the moment. He sat in the passenger seat of Sarah's car, head resting against the window, not speaking for fear and awe and smallness. In his silence Sarah told him that the police had called just after he'd left the house. They wouldn't say where they'd found her or how or what condition she was in, just that she was at the police station, that they could see her, that she was being evaluated to determine whether she would be able to come home. She'd tried to reach him at work, left a message, got tired of waiting, and decided just to go there, to meet him and tell him in person.

Sarah reached over to take his hand, leaving it every few seconds to reach for the

swinging crucifix, to stabilize it or just to rub her thumb across the nailed-down Jesus. He could hear her breathing, short, shallow. She bit her lower lip.

“You’re quiet,” she said.

“It’s overwhelming.”

She laughed, round, bright. “Yeah, it’s that.” She squeezed his hand.

They were silent for a while.

“What do you think she’s like now?” Sarah asked. “Do you ever think about that?

What she’s like?”

“No.”

“Me neither,” she said. “Me neither. Is that weird?”

“I don’t know. Maybe it’d be weird if we did think about it.”

She let go of his hand, reached up for the crucifix. Her left hand clicked the blinker on and they merged, gently, onto the exit back into town. “I don’t even have a car seat in here,” she said.

“We don’t know if she’s coming home today.”

“And I’ve been smoking -- Brian, I’ve been smoking in the house for weeks now. It’s going to be all over, in the carpet, in the curtains...”

“It’s fine, really.”

“Is it?”

“Yeah.”

They watched the town pass by.

“I don’t even know if she’s going to recognize us,” she said, and she pulled into a parking space out in front of the building and they were there. She let the car sit, running.

“Do you think she’ll recognize us?”

“I don’t know if I recognize us.”

She grabbed the crucifix, wound the chain tight around three fingers and stuck it in the pocket of her sweatpants. “I should have worn something nicer,” she said.

“You look fine.”

“You look like a guy with a job, I look like shit.” She pulled down the visor, checked herself in the mirror. Licked her fingers and rubbed smeared mascara from her eyes, ran fingernails through her hair.

“Do you want to go in?”

“We’re going to be parents again.”

“Yeah.”

“Jesus, I hope she’s okay.”

“Do you want to go inside?”

“Do you want to pray? I didn’t -- I mean, I haven’t been, for a while, but I think we ought to. I wouldn’t call this a miracle, but it’s something close.”

It would have been a miracle if she’d still been in the backyard the last time they went to look, or if they’d found her after a few panic-stricken minutes of searching, lost and scared but none the worse after a nap and an admonishment to stay in the yard. But he wasn’t there to pick a fight and the ingrained patterns of his upbringing still roared back to life every once in a great while, and so he nodded and they prayed in the quiet, in the car.

When they were done she switched the car off and they walked up to the station arm in arm, her fingers digging into his bicep and his own hand jammed into his pocket,

grasping at the meat of his hip. A man was waiting for them at the door. He guided them through rooms filled with desks and file cabinets and fluorescent lights and the officers that were there stood up as they passed. Applauded, whistled. The man led them into a room with a single table where a woman in a poorly-cut blouse sat next to a girl who was taller than their daughter, and thinner, and had shorter, redder hair and dirtier fingernails and clothes he'd never seen before. And when Sarah called her name it was a question and when Hailey called back, *Mama? Papa?*, both were questions too.



## CHAPTER 13

### MAN, WHO PARTS THE WINDBLOWN GRASSES

The night is cold, and he has no fire -- no means to carry it, no means to sustain it. He pulls his skins tight around himself, blows hot into his hands. He wraps his arms and legs around the bloodtipped spear, pulling it close as if to warm himself by it. He nestles his fingers into the warming places on his body: the undersides of his arms, the join of his legs.

The wind gusts, and the grass bends. On the air the scents of dying things. The wind blows again and the grass bends low, tickling the exposed places on his face; he wrinkles his lips and nose. Then he pushes out his lips, bursts his breath through them. His mouth and his belly gust with his own wind. The grasses part and bend back under his force. He feels like God: Man, who parts the windblown grasses. Who casts the bloodtipped spear. Who hunts, and lives outside of reason. Who knows that reason is the want of hunted things.

Against his back he feels the cradling soil. When he sleeps he dreams of Ur-Man staining green grasses red. In the morning, when the sun glows fire against the horizon, he rises, and leaves his imprint in the earth.

The shift of water blurs the man beneath its surface -- his face hardly human, swimming, swelling, pushed and drawn by currents. He blinks when Man blinks. Bares

his teeth when Man bares his teeth. He reaches for Man and Man reaches for him, and when they touch the water breaks and he dissolves beyond humanity. Broken, unrecognizable. Man draws his hand free of the water, bringing a dribbling handful up to wash his face, and in the wake of his hand's removal, the water-man attempts to reform. Man reaches down again into the water, cupping his hands for a drink. The water-man dissolves again.

When he's had his fill he takes up the blood-tipped spear and carries it with him to the highest place he sees. He listens, he looks, he smells. Wind-rustle, lazy swing of grass, the leavings of predators and prey. To his left, near the limit of his sight, a lone elk swings its head in his direction, tilting heavy antlers. It looks at Man, or seems to, then collapses to the ground with a tiger's teeth around its throat. It makes no sound as it falls.

The rest of the plain stretches under him. The stream cuts across the plain, flowing easily, silent beasts slipping past underneath its surface. Sparse-grown trees follow the stream's course in clusters, covering with thin shade the bodies of lazing predators. Great fields of grass and white-flowered trees surround the stream. The grass leans in the breeze, turning and returning in ways that speak of something secret in a language Man decides to acquire. In the great distance, the feet of mountains.

Gathered around a tree, a small herd, elk and elkings. Not far, not far. He squeezes the unyielding wood of his spear.

He watches, first, the grass surrounding them, searching for the hidden hunter, the predator with prior claim. He watches the grass until the elk begin to move and he's sure he sees no other hunters. He takes the bloodtipped spear in both hands and gallops down the face of the hill.

His eyes and ears and nose are open. He knows the dangers of the tall grass, hidden things that would just as soon hunt him as they would proper prey. He watches the grass in front of him as he runs. He smells the air as he breathes in, looking for the sharp of dandered fur and the sour of a carnivore's breath passing through bared teeth. He listens for the shift and press of footfalls other than his. His heart opens in the extremities of his legs and arms.

He reaches the flat of the plain. The elk, still beyond the reach of a spear's throw, sense his approach. He's expected this; his aim was never subtlety. They flee as a herd, the elkings in the center. Their hooves beat loud. Man feels their thunder in his teeth as he makes pursuit.

If he was made, he was made for this. The spring of his foot, tensile power of his calves, the cycle of his legs. Nothing within him tired, or straining; his breath still even, drawn through his nose. Sweat breaks over him early, and the pass of air cools him. He flies across the distance, unrelenting. The ground buckles underneath his feet. Tall grasses grab at him, wrapping around his feet, brushing at his waist. He eludes them. He rips them from the ground with the grip of his toes and the lift of his legs. He tramples them beneath his heel. He parts them with his movement, always forward, always pressing.

Ahead of him, a hunter rises out of the grass and claims, with untamed teeth and claws, the largest of the elk. The herd reacts in panic; they scatter in a discordant clash of hoofbeats and weak-throated bleating. For a thin moment the hunt seems over; the prey scattered, vulnerable. Man feels the blood-tipped spear rise of its own willing. But the moment dissolves; the herd recoalesces. The spear lowers. Man chases.

The sun tilts overhead, and he does not tire. He sees the wasting strength of the herd ahead of him, weakness in the spring of their hind legs. They glance backward at him, eyes wide and rolling. Something unspoken, acknowledged in the moment before a kill.

An elkling slows; gallop to trot, trot to jog. The herd, slowing, seems suspended -- in time, or space, or indecision. They could stop, and turn; charge at Man, with flying hooves and lowered, stone-hard racks of antlers. But elk are not hunters; elk are hunted things. The herd quickens, runs, and leaves behind the elkling.

Man does not break his stride. His plants his left foot into the ground and reaches his left hand forward, for aim, for balance. His right legs drifts behind him, stretching, opening his hips, and his right arm raises, clutching the bloodtipped spear. He turns from the plant of his forward leg, twisting from the open of his hips, letting the twist stretch his torso from his stomach to his tensed right shoulder; and then the muscles in his stomach pull together, and his collapses. His left arm swings back. He *pulls*; his back and side draw his right shoulder forward, aided by its own flex and tension, and the tension cascades down his arm -- the push of his triceps, the grip of his forearm, the subtle guidance of his thumb and fingertip.

The bloodtipped spear whispers free from his hand, Ur-Man calls from within a waking dream, and Man falls forward, catching himself with his right hand, and stumbles a few more steps until he can stand, upright, and watch the blood-tipped spear sink into the flank of the elkling, pass through its other side, and lodge into the ground, affixing his prey.

The elkling sags and dies. In this distance, the herd flees.

If he returns to his home they will ask him about Ur-Man. Ur-Man, the elkling of Man's herd, who was like the rest the rest of them, who was unlike Man. Ur-Man, who never ran as fast or threw as far, who hunched when he stood, barely visible over the tips of the grass. Whose blood first stained the blood-tipped spear. They will not understand Ur-Man's absence. They will ask Man for his reasons.

He has not gone back to them. He has wandered the wild of the Earth. He has made his home there, among the hunters and the windblown grasses. He has carved out for himself a place.

He lays his prize on a bare patch of ground, sets the spear close by his side, and draws from within his skins a hide-wrapped shard of onyx. He saws the rough and sharpened edge of his blade along the elkling's side. He pulls free a piece of flank and holds it up, red and glistening, in the late afternoon sun. He has no means to cook his food; the sky is clear, and there is no hope of fire. But cooked food is a rarity, a luxury, beyond the reach of his grasp. He takes the flank raw, ripping at it, feeling its wetness on his teeth, his lips, his chin and beard. Blood stains the green grass red. He feels the wind, smells blood. Sees the touch of the falling sun on the tops of the distant mountains. Hears the throated rumble of a hidden predator -- subtle, close. He takes his spear, twice tipped with blood, and finds his balance on his feet.

The tiger saunters from the grasses, a liquid of muscle and fur. The thin of its tongue slides over lips and stiffened whiskers. Its eyes take in first the fallen elk, then Man.

Man sets himself on the balls of his feet. The tiger sits back into its hind legs.

Man wraps both hands around the wood of the spear as claws like onyx slivers slide from the tiger's forefoot. In a moment: the still of a late and windless afternoon. A space of flattened grasses, trampled earth, and neither need nor want of reason. A drawing of muscle, tense, clenched. A baring of teeth. An indelible press of feet into earth. A hunger and an appetite.

## CHAPTER 14

### ZYRA, BORN AND DYING

In the morning no one came to wake her up; just the sun, risen and glowing through plastic-covered windows and pale blue curtains. She didn't remember lying down. The last she knew she was playing video games in the living room while her mother and father entangled themselves in a game of chess at the dining room table. She must have fallen asleep in the living room. They must have carried her to her bedroom and tucked her in. The thought of it made her feel small and beyond her own control. The thought of it made her feel safe.

She slipped her feet free of her blanket. She slid down off the bed and left the room, walking into the still-dim hallway and down the hall to the French door at the entrance to her parents' bedroom. The room glowed through translucent white curtains but no light crept out from underneath it. She knocked, on one of the low panes. The glass hummed beneath her knuckles. She tried the doorhandle and found it locked.

Behind the door, sounds like grinding glass and cut-short laughter: *huh, huh, huh*.

"Mom?" She called.

This had happened before, or something like it -- when her father's migraine had become nausea, and vomit spilled brown-red over the kitchen floor, and a fever and eyes splintered through with red. Her mother had taken him to their bedroom, shut and locked the door and forbidden Zyra from going into the hallway. For two days Zyra sat in the

living room and slept on the couch. She had been scared, but at least then her mother had come to the hallway door every hour or two to knock on the door and ask after her and tell her: *honey, we're okay.*

“Mom,” she said.

*Huh, huh, huh.*

When she was young she had locked herself in the bathroom. She had beaten on the door and cried until she heard the soft *whirr* of her father's power drill. Shortly thereafter the doorknob fell to the floor and he opened the door, standing there tall and sweaty, his face fleshy and unbearded and dark from the sun. He lifted Zyra from the bathtub and carried her to her bedroom, where he set her on the bed, looked down at her with unaged eyes, and told her, “You worried your mother,” because people then had worried over doors and frightened children.

“Mom.” She repeated it for minutes, until the sounds behind the door faded and took with them any possibility of permission or instruction.

She could take the power drill from the hallway closet. She could open her parents' door the same way her father had opened the bathroom door. But she couldn't see the places on the bedroom door where she would have to apply the drill; the handle was attached to a flat brass plate, which was attached to the door by means she couldn't decipher. And even if she could, she wasn't sure of her ability to operate the drill. Her father, when he used it, switched buttons on the base of it and changed the driver head with a small black key and when he used it he held it in a single hand, dark cords pushing out of his forearms like he was moving something heavy. She had small hands and she struggled with heavy things. Her mother often called her *dainty*.



She brushed her fingers -- too thick to be dainty, she thought, too clumsy -- over the glass. She had cracked a pane of it, once, with a hard rubber ball she had been fond of throwing down the hallway. She'd gotten into trouble for it, a spanking and a grounding. She tried to imagine her parents now, behind the door, reacting to her breaking another pane of glass. There were times they seemed to take her fears as a given, to hold her close and comfort her, and other times when they scolded her for them. She tried to imagine their faces in both scenarios, and could only think of them with dispassionate expressions, saying nothing, faces blank.

She went to the entry, to the closet where they kept coats and masks and things with which to deal with intruders. She thought to grab the axe in the back corner, but she could barely reach it and when she did she couldn't lift it. She settled for the hatchet hanging on the inside of the door. She carried it with both hands back to the bedroom.

"Mom?" She asked. "Dad?"

She tapped against the glass of the door with the hatchet blade.

"I'm going to break this."

Nothing; the distant hum of the refrigerator.

She swung the hatchet with both hands. It barely stopped when it met the glass, punching through, sending small crystals and thick plates spiraling inward. She tapped away at the edges of the hole with the flat of the hatchet until her shoulders tired and most of the sharp edges were gone. She pushed the curtain aside, and pulled on the door handle. The lock clicked, and the door eased open.

She withdrew her hand. It had been cut, and was already bleeding. She didn't bother caring. She pushed the door open until she could see the edge of the bed. She

listened for a sound of anything.

“Mom?”

She wasn’t allowed to go in their room without permission.

“Dad?”

She smelled vomit.

“I’m going to come in,” she said. “Okay?”

They didn’t say anything. If they had, if they’d made any noise at all, she would have screamed in fear and primal joy.

She said: “I’m coming in now, okay?” She paused. “I’m coming in,” she repeated.

She swung the door open until it tapped against the far wall.

Her father laid dead on his side, his eyes near red, his skin already sallowing. A red stain lay on the bedspread near his mouth, congealing. Her mother sat against the wall opposite him, head down and facing her red-stained lap. A smell something like rotted milk and greening meat. The books and pens and perfumes piled on the nightstands next to bloody tissues. The shoes lined up neatly against the foot of the bed. The sun through the window on the far wall. The shadows, the shadows.

Zyra thought: if I touch them I’ll smear my blood across their faces. She thought: if I touch them, I will die on the ground with my insides outside me. They’d told her about germs and body fluids and why they had to boil their water and their clothes and why they sprayed things from outside with bleach. Everything about the world betrayed them now -- the air, even, if bits from their coughing or their sneezing hung there. She hadn’t seen much of life and she hadn’t yet enjoyed it broadly but she clung to it with the

bred-in fear of ancestors who'd survived ice ages and wild animals but had no preparation for things that could invade them, could ruin them from the inside out. Which, all, is to say: she bid them goodbye from within the doorway. She missed them and she cried for their memory and the whole time she feared what sickness might invade her tears.

A hard, sharp line ached across the surface of her palm. She turned it over. A dark rift in red running from the meat of her thumb to the base of her fourth finger. Drooling. It flared pain down her arm in waves and churned up her stomach. It shortened her breaths in into small implosions, in-out, in-out. She clutched the hand at her hip and walked to the living room on the balls of her feet, saying, *ow, ow, ow*. Tears skipped over her cheeks, spilling onto the carpet, seeping into the space between her lips.

She had been cut enough to know that the wound would have to be cleaned. When she was very young her mother and father had washed out her cuts with soap and water from the sink, but they hadn't trusted the sink for months now. Most times the water came out brown and they had to run it for minutes until it cleared, and then boil it after that. Anymore when she was cut -- and they'd tried so hard to keep her from being cut -- they just poured peroxide into the cut so that it bubbled and stung, and she would squirm and whimper and ask them, *will you blow on it? Will you blow?* And they would give her a look she didn't entirely understand, and purse their lips, and blow cool air across it.

She remembered a man down the hall she'd known, who had given her caramels and tickled the underside of her chin, who inflected her name like it were made of separate words: *Zy, ra*. He told her jokes that she was never sure if she should laugh at. She hadn't spoken to him in some time, even before her parents had barricaded them all

inside the apartment, only her father ever leaving to pick up necessities. He had gentle hands, she remembered, and a soft-lipped smile, and a voice that stung and rumbled. And he would probably have caramels, and bandages, and he would know what she could do about her parents. He could pour peroxide on her, and blow.

She grabbed tissues from a container beneath the bathroom sink and balled five of them up in her hand. She felt them soaking through. Red trickled out through past the edges of her fist. She ignored the pain. She kept the hand at her side while she went to the front door.

She took the thumbturn between three fingers and turned her entire arm until it opened in a click that shook her fingerbones. For the security bar she took a chair from the dining room, leaving twin furrows in the carpet as she dragged it behind her to the door, and climbed on top of it. She pulled at the heavy bar with her legs and her back when she had it high enough she braced a shoulder underneath it and raise it the rest of the way with just her legs. She climbed down and pulled away the chair.

If her parents were alive, she knew, they would tell her not to go. No; they'd *instruct* her, which was a different thing. And if she didn't listen they would force her. She was small and they could overpower her if she disobeyed, though before today she'd hardly thought of disobeying.

She looked back at the open hallway door. After minutes she sat in the chair and told herself she wasn't waiting -- she was tired, she was resting. Still an unadmitted part of her wondered if her parents might walk out from the hallway just then in spotless clothes, sporting tired smiles, saying, *all right, Zy, let's see what's got you jumping*. Resurrected just by need, by the overwhelming requirement of them.

No one came. She sniffed, and opened the door, and stepped out.

She hadn't been in the hallway for seven months. It was a different place. Both wings of it were dark. Only the elevator bank in the center of the hallway was lit -- three fluorescent lights, one of which was blinking wildly. It smelled different, too, grey-green and dusty. She heard no familiar sounds, no sounds at all, and the ones she made herself came back thin and watered-down.

She went back in the apartment, to the entry closet, to grab her father's handlamp. It was heavy and well-stained with dirt and oil. When she clicked it on in the hallway it cut through the dark in brilliant white-blue light. She shone it down their end of the hallway, and saw nothing. She listened for anything, and was relieved when she heard nothing. She took another step out into the hallway. All the way out, now. She counted, slowly, to three. Nothing happened.

She closed the door.

They were the first apartment beyond the elevators in their wing, so the walk to the elevator bank was short and well-lit. Still, she felt her heartbeat echo through her chest. Her breathing felt too slow and too short. She tasted metal and her head hurt from crying. She paused in front of the elevators, each of them covered over with yellow tape in various stages of detachment.

When she had her breath again she shone the lamp down to the other end of the hallway. It shook in her hand. Nothing. To have seen nothing felt somehow worse than it did before.

Mr. Meyer's was the sixth door on the same side of the hall as the elevators, well inside the dark parts of the hallway. The light that filtered out around its edges made a

perfect outline of the door. She shone the handlamp on the numbers and mouthed each: *one, zero, C*. She knocked.

“Mr. Meyer,” she whispered. Then, louder: “Mr. *Meyer*.”

At the bottom of the door, a shadow. His muffled, gentle voice: “I’m not opening the door.”

“It’s Zyra.”

For a moment he said nothing. She wondered if he even remembered her. Then his voice again: “I’m not opening it. Whoever you’re with, tell them to fuck off.”

She’d never heard him swear before. She wondered if it was even him behind the door; it had been seven months, and he could have moved elsewhere. He could have vomited up his stomach and died. The thought tickled her between the shoulder blades and made the light seem brighter, eye-burning. “It’s Zyra from down the hall,” she said. She added: “I’m alone.”

“That’s low,” he said. He raised his voice. “*You’re* the sick ones. You know? I’m not stupid. Take your girl-bait somewhere else.”

“Mr. Meyer,” she said. “Is that you?”

“Leave, Zyra,” he said. “Whoever’s with you, get away from them and stay away.” His shadow disappeared.

“Mr. Meyer?” She pounded the door. “Mr. Meyer!”

Nothing.

“Help me!” She kicked the door, then again. She pounded it until her hand stung. “Help me!” The echoes of her voice mocked her; they were small and high-pitched and they asked for something she didn’t know how to give.

His shadow returned.

“Zyra.” He said her name like it was supposed to be said, without his special inflection.

“Mr. Meyer. Help me.”

“You’re alone?”

“Yes.”

He paused. “What happened to your parents?”

She almost told him how they’d died, but she remembered how scared her parents were of sick things, how they’d kept themselves so far from anything that might have come into contact with the sickness. So she told him: “They left.”

“They left?”

“Yes.” The repetition of it hurt.

“That was wrong of them.”

“Yes,” she said.

“Would you like to live here?”

“I just need help.”

His lock clicked. His door open. Behind it stood something like him: drastically thinner, his hair gone almost completely grey, his clothes filthy. He held an aerosol can in his left hand, a knife in his right. He looked into the dark behind her, eyes tight. He looked down at her, smiling. “You really are alone.”

She nodded.

His smile collapsed, not in any way that she could notice from one moment to the next, only that it had been there and was no longer. He looked serious now. He was

looking *over* her instead of at her. He was dwelling on parts of her. It made her queasy. His eyes went from her eyes to her hand and back again. “What’s in your hand?” he asked.

“I cut it.”

He looked at her again. His eyes went tight again. “Where are your parents,” he said.

She vomited, bright red, on his carpet.

He looked down at it, and up at her. His eyes were wide and there was nothing behind them. His mouth played at making words but said nothing. He looked for all the world like he might cry, and she couldn’t tell if that amused her or broke her own heart.

“I’m sorry,” she said.

He slammed the door. Behind it, he screamed.

When the echoes of his shutting door subsided, she could only hear her own breathing and the low hum on the handlamp. Its stark light on the wall hurt her eyes. It felt heavier. *Everything* felt heavier: her heart, her stomach, her feet. The memory of her parents and what used to be Mr. Meyer. The darkness in the hallway and the empty apartments where there had once been people who looked down at her, who touched her hair and gave her things.

She couldn’t tell if she had walked back to her own apartment or if she had stayed at Mr. Meyer’s but when she laid a hand on the knob and turned it knob stayed firmly in place. She dropped the handlamp and sat with her back against the door. She cried, she thought; something like crying. Like giving in to the weight of a particular sadness. Parts of her clenched. The handlamp, buzzing, winked off.



She woke up in the bathroom, sitting on the edge of the bathtub. Her father was kneeling down in front of her, holding her injured hand. His face was bearded and well-fleshed and dark from the sun. Behind him, through the open door, she saw her mother in scant glimpses, rummaging through the closet.

*Hold still*, her father said. He picked up a brown bottle from the floor and unscrewed its lid.

I don't want peroxide, she said.

*Hold still*. He squeezed her wrist. He held the bottle over her hand.

If it burns, will you blow on it? Will you blow?

*Hold still*.

Cold liquid splashed down onto her hand, bubbling red and burning.

It hurts. Dad, it hurts. Blow on it. Please.

Her father said nothing, because he was no longer there. The bathroom was empty, and the living room behind it. Her cut burned and foamed pink. She grabbed it at the wrist and squeezed. She ground her teeth. She spread the injured palm and blew, blew -- as hard as she could manage, not hard enough.

## CHAPTER 15

### NATALIA, THE TEMPEST

In my clearest memory he shows me how to throw a cross: the weight of the body, translated through the hip to its end in the arm and the fist. When he demonstrates I feel the air move. Afterward he squares my shoulders and pushes my legs into a fighter's stance. He tells me in English: bend your knees, hold your arms close. He tells me in Russian: hold your fists just below your eyes. Satisfied, he settles into his own stance beside me and throws another punch, swift and violent. He looks at me from the corner of a smiling eye.

*Now you.*

The train stopped half a mile short of Oak Park and I walked the rest, jacket-less, blowing into my cupped hands, little runs of steam slipping through my fingers. By the time I got to Tim and Gina's the backs of my hands were red and chapped and my eyes were watering from the cold. I knocked on the door, hard enough to feel in my knuckles afterward.

Gina came to the door a few seconds later. Her eyes flickered once when she saw me, and she gathered the opposite sides of her cardigan around her. "God, Nattie," she said. "You must be freezing. Come inside."

I gestured at my face. "Car accident," I said.

She opened the door wider. "Come in."

"Is she ready?"

"Tim's helping her finish packing."

"How's she been?"

Her mouth folded downward, and she let the door close a little. "She's good. She's sleeping better."

"Peeing the bed, still?"

She frowned deeper. "Not as often. We packed her nighttttime underwear just in case. Make sure you call them that -- 'nighttime underwear.' She gets embarrassed. She doesn't like to wear them, so she might fight you some."

Sveta walked up behind her, pigeon-toed and tall, ankles peeking from the bottoms of her corduroys, pink backpack high on her shoulders. She'd cut her hair chin-length. She stopped beside Gina in the doorway and smiled and I wondered how many of her teeth were still baby teeth. I wondered if Tim and Gina did the tooth fairy. "Hi, Mom," she said.

"Did you say goodbye to Tim?" Gina asked.

"Yes."

"Okay." Gina knelt to hug her. "Have fun, okay?"

"I will."

"And call if you need anything." Gina looked up at me. "Call if she needs anything."

I shrugged.

Gina turned back. "Okay, sweetie." She ran a hand over Sveta's hair and I felt my

weight settle forward in my feet. “Be good to your mom,” she said.

When Gina let go Sveta hugged me around the waist and I ran my hand over hair too. “You ready to go?” I asked.

She nodded. Her head pressed into my ribs.

I waved goodbye to Gina, more a tilt of my hand than an actual wave, and I took Sveta down their front sidewalk. When we reached the corner Gina yelled something about giving us a ride and I ignored it, turning to wave like I thought she’d said goodbye again. She was still in the doorway, arms crossed over her stomach, and Tim behind her with his hands resting on her shoulders. Both of them watching us go, like we were headed for someplace foreign and we hadn’t told them when we’d be back, or if.

We took the train home, seated side-by-side in a half-empty car. Sveta sat near the window, backpack cradled in her lap, looking out at the eroding city. Like it was crumbling inward, I thought. As we neared the city center the buildings got taller, more complete, and her head craned upward to look at the tops. I watched her reflection in the windowglass -- brushing the hair from her eyes, blinking three and four times at once. And me behind her, older, harder, soft bruises just short of faded on my eye and cheek.

Behind my reflection I saw the guy across the aisle look over at me, then stare. I thought about turning my back further, or maybe pulling Sveta into some useless conversation that the guy would be too nice to interrupt, but he was already leaning into the aisle, arm extended. His tap on my shoulder was almost tender.

He smiled when I turned around, like we were old friends. He was young, shaved, dressed in a pink shirt and an oversized suit. “You’re the *Burya*, right?”

“Just *burya*.”

“Yeah.” He nodded, like he agreed with something I’d said. “I recognized your neck tattoo. I saw your fight with Diaz a couple years back? Brutal, man. I heard they thought you were going to have to retire after that.”

“I did.”

“Yeah?” He pointed to his own eye, his own cheek. “What are you, sparring or something?”

“Car accident.”

“Oh, man,” he said. “I’m sorry.”

I shrugged. “Wasn’t your fault.”

He laughed, sat back in his seat, and I disappeared from his world. I sat back into my own seat. Warm, thin-worn polyester against my spine. The conductor said something incomprehensible, and the train banked left, shuddered, and started to slow.

“What’s a *borrea*?” Sveta asked me.

“*Burya*,” I said.

“What’s a *burya*?”

“It’s Russian. It means ‘precious.’”

“Precious?”

I nodded.

“I like that,” she said.

Halfway between the station and my building I laid a hand on Sveta’s shoulder to stop her walking and pointed to a lot across the street, half an acre of browning weeds with a building squeezed into one end -- brick-and-mortar, plywood where the windows had been. “That used to be my favorite place to play,” I said.

“What was it back then?”

“No, it was like this. Not boarded up, maybe, but mostly the same.”

She looked at it, at me. “Tim and Gina let you play there?”

“This was back when I lived with Uncle Vova.”

“What did you play?”

“Tag. Hide and seek, sometimes. We played invasion in the building, before they boarded up the windows. Sports. Baseball, football, ground hockey, soccer. Smear the queer. Squirt guns, water balloons. Fireworks.” I paused. “Fireworks are dangerous, but... I don’t know. Other games. Red rover, things like that.”

“I like red rover,” she said.

We started walking again.

“And soccer,” she continued. “I was in a league last spring.”

“Nice.”

She’d been to my place before -- Gina had picked her up a few times after day visits, and brought her over once while I was recovering from eye surgery -- but I was still nervous, over-aware of the trash bags outside the building, Sveta’s careful steps as we walked up the stairs, the shadowplay across her face when I swung my door open. The burn marks on my living room carpet, the bare patches of plaster on the walls. The bottles I’d thought would escape notice in the corner. Her smile, thin-lipped and struggling.

We took her things to the bedroom and laid them on an inflatable mattress I’d set in the corner. She prodded the mattress with her toe, watching as it gave under the force of her foot, returned as she took it back, balancing the whole time on a single leg, arms

outstretched. She dropped onto the mattress, exhaling roughly as she bounced, giggling as she lay back, rolling in the sheets and pillows. And she jumped up just as quickly, grinning, long-limbed and effortless, like a dancer, like a fighter.

When I'd worked at Vova's, fifteen years back, I'd been in the kitchen with Uncle Vova and Aunt Lyuda and a rotating cast of former Soviets fresh new to the country. I listened to songs and stories in a language I only half understood, and have mostly forgotten since. I sipped *medouvka* until they made me stop and nipped the appetizers from the trays. I stuck around after the restaurant closed each night, after Vova and Lyuda finished the counting, and faked like I had permission from Tim and Gina to stay overnight with Vova, or with Sergey when me and him were a thing. I went back home to Tim and Gina's in the morning, smelling like bread and pickling, already too late to go to school.

When I was young, younger than Sveta, my dad took me there almost weekly, giving me sips of his drinks, and drinks of my own, hidden in soda bottles, whenever Uncle Vova gave in. He'd sit me with Aunt Lyuda in the kitchen or behind the counter while he and Uncle Vova drank, sometimes for hours. After close he'd stumble out, crying, holding Uncle Vova for support, and the two of them would sing Moscow songs in the backseat as Aunt Lyuda drove us back to the boarding house. After dad's funeral Uncle Vova brought me back to the empty restaurant and told me stories about him, only ever leaving my side to make more food, bring more drinks. When Aunt Lyuda went home, Uncle Vova poured vodka for himself, *kvas* for me, and we drank together and cried.

That afternoon, when Sveta and I entered, a high-school-aged girl sat behind the

hostess station, idly disassembling a *matriyoshka*. When the door swung shut and the little bell rang, she looked up, put the doll down, smiled broadly, and said: *privyet*, and welcome to Vova's. She sat us at a table near the front window and handed us laminated menus.

When the waitress came to take our drink orders, I ordered *medouvka* and Sveta ordered a pop. "I like your dress," she told the waitress.

"Thank you." She smiled. "It's called a *serafan*."

After she left I told Sveta, *sarafan*.

A minute later the kitchen doors swung open and Uncle Vova stepped into the dining room, round, whitehaired, and redfaced. He searched the tables until he saw me, and shouted, "I know it!" in an overcooked Russian accent. He kissed his hands and spread toward to me. "Anymore, there is one person only who orders true Russian *medouvka*. You make me proud." He stepped nimbly between tables and chairs, customers stopping to look up at him and us. When he reached the table, he turned to and called across the dining hall to our waitress, "Why does no one tell me of this before? My -- how do you say it, *krestnitsa*--"

I played along with the act. "Goddaughter."

"Aye, this language. She is not my God and not my daughter and still I must call her this. And this --" he lifted a hand to Sveta, who'd turned nearly crimson by that point -- "this beautiful girl, you call her what? My goddaughter-daughter? Grand-goddaughter?" He gave a thumbs-down gesture, blew a raspberry. The customers laughed, and the waitress smiled and rolled her eyes. "Call the president," he said, "and tell him you need a new word in this stupid language. Until then: Natalia is *krestnitsa*,



Svetlana is *vnuchka*, and I will hear nothing else of it from you.”

The customers laughed again, and turned back to their meals.

Uncle Vova wrapped me in a hug, and I managed to introduce him to Sveta just before he lifted her bodily from her chair into another embrace. He held her there, her knees braced against his hip, and murmured to me in his real voice, the one from my early memories: “This isn’t a place for family. To the kitchen with you. And you,” he raised an eyebrow at Sveta, “the waitress told me you ordered a coke? What horrendous things has your mother been teaching you?”

In the kitchen I introduced Sveta to Aunt Lyuda, and we stood around the counters and stoves and ate together like family. Sveta sat on the edge of the counter while Uncle Vova fed her spoons of soup or fresh *pirozhki*, dumplings from the oven, little finger bowls filled with sweet sauces. He taught her the names of each food she ate, and how to critique them in Russian. *Pirozhki* and *syrniki* she enjoyed; the rest she described in various manglings of the Russian word for “disgusting.” When she called *kvas* “oater-tittle-no,” Uncle Vova told me, “This is not your daughter.” She squealed.

We told her some of the safer stories, which ran out quickly, and then Uncle Vova did something with his eyes in Aunt Lyuda’s direction and she pulled Sveta from the counter and took her into the dining hall to watch the waitresses perform a troika. Uncle Vova pulled two tumblers from a cupboard and a liter of vodka from under the sink. He patted the stool beside him at the counter.

“The food,” I said.

“Who do you think made the food while I drank with Mikhail? The oven, the stove, Ludmila. Sit.” He patted the stool again, firmly. I sat.

“Not too much,” I said. “We’re going to the Children’s Museum after this.”

He poured a finger for each of us, slid my glass across the counter to me.

“‘Children’s museum.’” We tapped glasses and drank. He took mine as I set it down and poured another for each of us. “What do they have there? Ancient finger paintings? Old tinker toys?”

We drank again, and he let my glass sit.

“She’ll be taller than everyone there by a foot,” he said.

“She’s got Sergey’s limbs,” I said.

He shook his head. “Yours. You were tall for a ten-year-old.”

“She’s eight. And those legs, long like that? Those are ballet legs.”

The doors swung open, and a waitress walked into give Uncle Vova a new order. He nodded and dismissed her with a hand. When she left, and the double doors swung open, closed, open, closed, I could see the edges of whirling *sarafans*, the customers clapping along in time to the machine-gun pizzicato of the recorded balalaika.

Vova offered me the bottle, and I declined. He chuckled, mumbled something in Russian, and poured another for himself. “You should take her to the ballet.”

“I wanted to, last Christmas. *Nutcracker* was here.”

He grunted disapproval. “*Swan Lake*.”

“Too expensive, and the only company that puts it on is Sergey’s. And she hates it.”

“She hates *Swan Lake*? And *kvas* besides?” He shook his head. “There must have been a mix-up when they delivered her. Your real daughter is out right drinking *kvas* and getting into trouble and talking about how much she likes the ballet.”

“I hated ballet when I was her age.”

“You liked it enough when you got older, huh?” He poured another drink, over my objections. “Maybe it was the muscles, or the tight pants. Give her some years, she’ll come around.”

He laughed, I tried. We sat a while.

“Fine, *burya*,” he said. “Take her to a fight.” He went to check the food.

I drank. Outside, the music ended, and customers gave scattered applause. Sveta ran through the kitchen doors, and Aunt Lyuda followed close behind her, worried, searching Vova’s eyes and mine. Sveta hopped up on the stool beside me, seated backward so she faced uncle Vova. I put the bottle back under the counter.

“Can you teach me the troika?” She asked.

“Can I teach you the troika?” he clapped his hands together. “*Vnuchka*, I can teach the troika to a horse, a house, and a half-blind whirlwind in less than an hour. For you? Twenty minutes.”

We got to the children’s museum a little after nine; the lights were on but the parking lot was empty and the doors were locked. I pounded on the glass for about a minute, until a security guard came to the door and told us that the museum was open from nine to nine. He was my height, maybe 200 pounds, fleshy around the jaw; he had mace, but no gun, and I couldn’t switch off the buzzing in my head, the part of me that kept looking for the wrong thing to say. Sveta’s head kept turning from the orange dark of the parking lot to the fluorescent bright inside the museum, and finally she said she was tired and we left and took the night train home.

When we got back to the apartment Sveta went straight to the bedroom and

started changing into a pair of yellow sleep shorts and long-sleeve t-shirt with a cartoon panda on it. I waited in the doorway, not wanting to strip off yet, not wanting to let Sveta see my body. “Don’t forget to put on your underwear,” I said.

“I have underwear on.”

“The nighttime ones, I mean.”

“I’m wearing them,” she said, and dropped onto the mattress.

My head buzzed.

She pulled the covers up to her neck and turned toward the wall. When she fell asleep I was still staring at her back, wondering what Gina would have said if she was here. I waited another five minutes, until she began to snore, and then I sat down on the edge of my bed and started taking off my shoes.

Let me tell you about my body.

I have four tattoos: a cross on the back of my neck, my father’s name in Russian across my shoulder blades, a lion on my right shoulder, and the word *burya* over the scar on my right forearm where Sergey used to touch me and tell me, I can still love you.

I’ve had earrings ripped out of both of my ears, both times while I was in group home; the first time it happened I stopped fighting, the second time I shoved the other girl’s head through a window. Her friend picked up one of the pieces of broken glass and gave me the scar on my other forearm. A few years later I got stabbed again with a broken bottle during a barfight; it shattered on my ribs, but it left a little constellation of pink-white lines below my right breast. After I started kickboxing I broke a shin, three ribs, an elbow, and a cheekbone, all leaving little marks, little dents you wouldn’t notice unless you were looking, and nobody looked anymore. In my last fight Diaz took a DQ

for stomping my head when I was down, collapsing the eye socket, blinding me in my left eye, and ending an otherwise decent career as a fighter.

I've got two surgical scars: my eye and my C-section.

I've tried suicide twice; once with pills, and once with a boxcutter down my forearm in the place where Sergey would later run his fingers and tell me, I can still love you -- adding, in the months before he left, even if you are *burya*. My first time on the ward they asked me if I had a family history of depression. I asked what made a person depressed, and what they told me more or less boiled down to: an inability to trust happiness. I asked the doctor how that could be hereditary, and she told me things about receptors and chemicals in the brain, things that could be written into our genetics, like our height or the color of our eyes. My second time on the ward I asked if there was something in the genes that controlled suicide, some chemical that made the brain not want to keep the body alive, and they told me about predisposition, and environment, and asked me if I'd ever thought about letting someone else raise my daughter.

I woke to Sveta's silhouette beside my bed, smelling sharp and warm of urine. She pushed my shoulder twice, and it took me another few seconds to scrounge the rest of my consciousness. "I peed the bed," she told me.

"I know. It's okay."

A squeak caught in her throat, and she sniffed.

"You want to get washed up?"

"Yes."

"Okay. Go on to the bathroom, I'll be there in a second." I clicked on my bedside lamp after she left and walked over to the dresser, stepping over the air mattress with the

small dark spot in the middle. I grabbed a pair of shorts for her and traded my wifebeater for a henley. I decided the scars on my legs didn't need covering.

Sveta had stripped naked, clothes piled in the far corner, and stood staring at herself in the bathroom mirror when I got there. Sergey's legs, my hips, my shoulders, my arms, his hands. Dad's eyes, angled upward, always looking somehow sad. Sergey's mouth making Gina's facial expressions, the downward fold of the lips, narrowing of the eyes. I turned the faucet on, let it run, and sat beside her on the toilet lid.

"Do you have to tell Tim and Gina about me peeing the bed?" She asked

"No, I won't tell them."

"It was an accident."

"I know."

"And I don't think they'd let me stay here again if they knew."

"Of course they would," I said, and handed her a tissue.

The faucet water ran, probably hot enough by now.

"Mom?"

"Yeah, sweetie."

"What happened to your eye?"

And I shrugged and told her, car accident.

After a while she asked, "Does it hurt?"

"Not even a little."

"Can I touch it?"

"Sure."

She pressed her finger to it, hard, and pain rolled outward from my blind eye like

blood clouding through water. I smiled. “See?”

She lessened the pressure, and her fingers down the yellowed skin like a caress.

“Borrea,” she said.

*“Burya.”*

“Precious,” she said.

“No.” I shook my head. “No, no, no.”

## CHAPTER 16

### IN LIEU OF ABSENCE, FLESH

*On my way home I tripped over edges ringed with leaves and bloodsoaked pavement fell facefirst into an absence where there was white and white and white splintering and just as suddenly black and cold black running in rivulets up my face down my neck in the seam between my tightpressed lips there were no other colors I was terrified*

*and then there was not white or black or nothing there was a spark violet so dim I wondered if it had always been there and I had simply failed to notice it flickered like lightning like a circuit closing a lightbulb unsure of its stability and then there were others around it reaching out and grasping at each other in timid arcs I watched it storm in gentle lavender in the dark*

*I felt a second layer of flesh slather itself over my own cold and quivering but warming stilling gathering firmness like a prison an encasement wrapping and constricting my entirety without relief but for the interruption around my middle a tiny discontinuity a space in which to breathe or to feel like a thing other than an animal trapped in something larger and clumsier than itself*

*then the violet turned to red bright and surging in thick strands like a dying star and the second flesh began to pulse and my interruption my lifesaving space in the entombment stitched itself together violently the lightning grew less certain grew stochastic and sputtering green and yellow and the second flesh stopped pulsing, settled,*



*became calm not a nullification but a living thing a flesh in the sense in which I had always known it and in time I grew less certain in distinguishing it from my own*

*its nerves embedded in my first skin reaching out and talking with my first nerves in a language I could not speak but felt but felt in waves in steady rhythms underneath the shifting sky in colors I had not seen before in either set of flesh for which I had no words but the ones in which my first skin conversed with my second:*

*(languid dark collecting dark something like blackforest green at the point just before dawn and in between a color that was no particular color or fire threading upward from my middle while the darkness lit in something like luminescent alabaster or an orange so pale it could have been white but succeeded in being itself in being orange not to spite white but to insist upon itself and in between a color that was no particular color or footsteps tracked in fire across the sky and in between a color that was no particular color like the sky itself which held no particular color but wished to)*

*and though I had all but forgotten the feel of my own unsmothered flesh and my second skin had become less a tomb than something insular (a fur coat an armor) I could nonetheless feel my armor growing thinner less firm than the tensile strands which had enveloped me and the language with which it spoke to my own skin lost its melodic lexicon and the sky grew stale and streaked through with colors I had already known*

*and the second flesh tore itself in the middle and exposed my first flesh in the breach quivering and terrified and the sky grew perfect dark again and fractured throughout in sputtering fuchsia but faltering and sparks winking out like stars like a dying sky and there was nothing except a color that I will never feel again felt by my dissipating second skin*

*which sloughed itself away*

*and the nothing released me expelled me out into the hard press of autumnal night*

*naked and shaking in my first flesh which by now felt like the exposed ends of nerves and*

*the world was not the same one I remembered it was older and quieter and brighter if*

*bright can still be a thing when the light is untenable and the whole world quavers like*

*something that has known too many razored edges like something whose essential fabric*

*might at any moment split itself back into nonexistence one unconscious bifurcation of a*

*strand at a time at a time at a time*

## CHAPTER 17

### MIKHI, QUESTION

Mikhi had taken up residence in the corner of his eye, in the passenger seat of his car, with her legs near-bare and folded underneath her, staring half-heartedly into her phone. Occasionally laughing; occasionally reaching up to adjust the volume on the stereo or to skip the track or to reach out and rub his shoulder. Squinting at the still-low sun, the expression carving shallow lines at the corners of her eyes that better men than him would simply blur out in post-production -- and they would slim her, too, and brighten her eyes and assemble out of her face something more conventional. Because her face, as it was, was a *why*, a *how*, a confusion of unremarkable parts (undeserving, even), summing together into something ill-defined and frustrating and beautiful. He'd grown accustomed, when she wasn't looking, sometimes when she was, to staring at her until he'd solved the mystery of it, and then he'd look away, and then he'd forget, and then he'd have to do it again -- for curiosity's sake, if nothing else.

But still, she was on runways. She was in magazines. Never alone, never in front, but *there*, above a brand name, below a logo, dark-eyed and slender, severely cheekboned. Always in motion -- like she might leap off a page, or further into it. Like she might speak.

And she was speaking now -- glancing between the road, her phone, and him, she was asking, "What time are we going to go back?"

And he said, “We’re not even there yet.”

“I know, I know. I’m sorry. I need to know what time, though.”

He lowered the volume of the music. “Sweetie, we’re not even *there yet*. Why are you asking when we’re not even there yet?”

“I’ve got a thing at eight. Apparently a really important thing. Patrice texted me.”

“Patrice.”

She shrugged, unfolding her legs. She stretched them in front of her, muscles writhing, endless. Her ankles skimmed the underside of the glovebox, her forehead sitting comfortably beneath the softtop. *I might be in love with this car*, she’d told him once, just *because I fit in it*.

“Even if it’s at eight,” he said, “you get there, what? Like, 10:45? 11:45?”

“Eleven,” she said. “-ish. But I’ll need to change, redo makeup, hair...”

“You don’t need any of that. You look amazing.”

“Well, they’ll have higher standards,” she said.

Something soured in his stomach. He remembered the acid taste of the morning’s coffee, sipped hot on the edge of a half-empty bed while he counted minutes, compulsively checking his watch, his cufflinks. He said, “Just about every other girl I know, you tell them they look amazing, they say ‘thank you.’”

“Please, Mark, what time?”

“I made reservations at Provence,” he said.

“I don’t even know what Provence is.”

“People with higher standards than you know what Provence is.”

“Mark. What. Time.”

He reached up to scratch at an eyebrow -- a tell, she called it, a nervous tic -- and instead his fingers found hard plastic, left a pale smear across his sunglasses. The sour thing in his stomach rose higher, churning red just below his ribs. In the corner of his eye she was colossal. So much of her, and all at once, and all the time.

For want of a better thing to say, he replied: "Six."

"Six is good. Thank you."

He'd always imagined it this way: the glare of headlights (there were always headlights, because it was always night, and the driver behind the headlights was one of a series of uniformly bearded, flannel-shirted, baseball-capped men, moderately drunk on cheap beer purchased unironically), and the brief sounding of a horn and just enough time to look over and see the horizontal grille just outside her window, close enough to reach out and brush with fingertips, to try and stop with a well-intentioned stiffarm; from there, time resuming, everything going *in*, the windowglass all at once turning shattered, the car door cratering inward, the roof buckling down; and Mikhi, her body shifted sideways, her hair floating upward and outward in the opposite direction amid faceted glass flying; and then the car pushing out from under him, seatbelt vise-tight, pulling him with it as the car crumpled and buckled and slid to a stop and his body caught up to in sections, like a whip, his head smacking against the driverside window, cracking it.

And afterward no sound. The door on her side breached. The other driver, inevitably unharmed, running to his window shouting expletives and apologies, always repeated -- *sorry, sorry, so sorry*. Her body bent over the center console of the car. Her head, her neck, resting on his shoulder, on his arm, in his lap.

Breathe, slowly.

Deliberate heartbeats.

Flush of shame warm in his shoulders and neck, and eyes forward, on the road upcoming, on things ahead.

A block before they reached the cafe she stopped at the body of a dead bird, squatting down, heels of her sneakers pitched clean off the ground, shorts riding close to the tops of her thighs. Around her, the city continued, parting as if for a riverstone, slipping by without concern. Even the gawkers, low-slung men and head-turned drivers in the passing stop-and-start traffic, felt almost innocuous -- just eyes, observing her, perhaps taking him in on the periphery, perhaps making the connection, perhaps aware that the two of them were a *them*. But maybe not. Maybe she was just the Girl with the Legs, and he was a guy on the sidewalk, and that was it, all, *finito*.

Beneath her the bird rippled at the ends of brown-grey feathers and the down covering its chest. One wing spread, one folded back across its middle, like it were just about to give a speech, or sing a solo; like it had died extolling the virtues of whatever sky god was supposed to have watched over it.

“Don’t touch it,” he said.

“I’m not going to touch it.” She tugged at the bottom of the shorts.

“I’m just saying.”

She bent her head close, pursing her lips, as if she were about to blow on it. Then she stood, smoothing her sweater. They walked away in what passed for silence.

“I think we should have buried it,” she said. “And I hate that. You know? I hate the fact that I think that.”

“Why?”

“Because it’s a fucking dead bird, is why.”

He snuck his arm around her, resting his hand in the soft spot just above her hipbone. She tottered, slightly, slowing her steps to match his, laying her head on his shoulder. Her hair smelled sharp and earthy. In the arm he wrapped around her, in the side of his body she pressed against, he could feel her heelstrikes like they were his own. If he loved her -- and he was confident that he did -- it was for this: when they hid away their sharp edges and pressed in so close as to be constituent of each other. Commingled, borderless. He was aware of stares from jealous passersby, and he welcomed them now -- *let them come, let them stare, let them see the two us now, definite.*

When they reached the cafe he held the door for her, and she smiled, and she did something like a curtsy, and his pulse shook his entire body.

They ordered Turkish coffee and agreed to split an elaborate pastry. While their waiter went off to bring their drinks she thumbed through her phone and laid a hand, pale and red-fingernailed, on the surface of the table. He brushed his fingers across the tips of hers; the surface of the table cold, her hands only slightly warmer. She smiled, tightlipped. He solved her face.

He asked, “What do you want to do today?”

She shrugged, stirring coffee.

“Come on,” he said. “You’ve got all night to be in New York. Be here for a second.”

She sighed, but she laid her phone on the table, facedown. She intertwined her fingers with his. “Okay,” she said. Her voice just barely rising above the cafe’s murmur. “I’m sorry. I’m here.”

“Good,” he said. “We’ve got --” he looked at his watch -- “five hours, almost --”

“Is that the watch?” The corners of her mouth curled up.

He nodded, explicitly casual. He’d worn it on purpose -- it had been a birthday gift from her, a Baume & Mercier that she’d had engraved across the back simply, *for Mark*. He’d refused it, initially, protesting about the expense of it during what had been lean years for her, and they’d argued over it for nearly an hour until he let it go. He found out later that she’d traded a favor with a friend who did fitting work for the boutique where she’d bought it. He’d tracked down the friend, tracked down the boutique, and bought a ring in white gold that he’d had engraved, *forever*, simply for the poetry of it. He’d tried to return it some months later, during a short breakup; no returns on engraving, they’d told him.

“Five hours to fill,” he said. “What are you up for?”

“What’s to do here?”

He paused. He’d planned the evening: Provence, then a small art exhibition, someone just on the cusp of recognition; then walking on the riverfront, something long, sparsely lit, velvet... But the day itself was still unfilled, with vague notions of shopping or eating that he’d mostly hoped she would fill in on her own. “Downtown, I guess. There’s good shopping.”

“I haven’t got money.”

And he knew better than to offer to pay. “A museum or something? There’s probably some artsy thing here.”

“That sounds good,” she said. “I’m sorry, but can I leave you here for a second? I need a cigarette.”



“Of course.”

She didn't so much stand as she unfolded upward, and then walked out, past the counter and the tables and the glass door, and posted herself against the granite facade outside. She sparked the cigarette twice and put to her lips. He couldn't see her breathing or the movement of her chest, but she exhaled a small cloud, pluming outward.

He took his phone from his pocket. He had texts and emails to look over and he paid them only enough attention to ensure that no one had died, that nothing had burned down, and then he opened his browser and he searched: *things to do in hartford*. Unsatisfied with the results he got, he refined: *Arts and Museums in hartford*. Capital A, capital M.

A small listing of events: museums, local music venues, the showing he'd planned on attending. And everywhere else, beseeching: support the arts, donate to the arts, invest in the arts. He had money enough to have considered philanthropy, and art -- a love of Mikhi's and a passing interest of his -- had more than once come up when he thought of it. He'd known artists, known photographers and filmmakers; their energy invigorated him, eluded him, like some electric wisp, a static charge that arced between minds but always skipped his own. He could picture himself in a suit of some modern cut, grasping a champagne flute, holding forth with three of four mopheaded, bespectacled intellectual types, he pouring out his admiration, they their gratitude. Each granted purpose by the other. He made a note on his phone, even set it with a reminder: *look into arts patronage*.

Outside, between cigarette draws, Mikhi was conversing with a middle-aged woman, smiling politely while her eyes did cutting things.

*MoMA*, he typed. *The Met*. He scrubbed his memory for any other museums he

might know. *Carnegie Hall. Maybe something w/ film - Tribeca.* Filmmaking might be ideal -- the festival itself, yes, but also the Q&A panels with the filmmakers, the premieres, the crowding paparazzi. An opportunity for Mikhi, a subtle hand in the production of the films: he could tell the directors, here is my girlfriend (or by then something more serious) -- Svetlana Mikhailovna Sergeyevna Karpenko, call her Mikhi for the posters, former model, current actress, perfect for something black and white and indie.

The scrape of her chair across the tile floor made him look up; she was already sitting, and scowling, and rummaging through her purse. "The woman outside?"

He nodded.

"Wanted to know if I'd ever thought about modeling."

"Sorry."

"Sorry nothing. I took her card." She did something like laughing, and then she raised a hand as if to make point, but her tongue never made it past her top lip. She bit down, stared into the middle distance, left the thing unsaid. He knew it, anyway: The Shoot That Would Have Changed Everything, if she hadn't missed it because of The Ex-Boyfriend Who Would Not Let Her Out Of His Car. She'd only told him the story once, but she seemed to live on the edge of retelling it, every time a booking went south or a hold failed to produce anything. It was the reason she didn't kiss him until three months after their first date. It was the reason she hadn't yet let him drive her anywhere that she could get to by public transportation.

"But maybe the thing tonight," he said, meaning -- maybe that thing, instead of all prior, is the one on which your career turns.

And she repeated the almost-laugh. “It’s a charity event,” she said. “Half the guest list probably won’t show.”

“But for you it’s mandatory?”

She scowled at him.

After the first few minutes, after the play of hard light on angled brushstrokes was no longer a novelty and the broken pieces of busts and ancient statues no longer captured that small piece of his attention, he found himself more enamored of the museum’s descriptions: names and dates printed in imposing font, tacked to the wall beside glass and gold-colored frames. Beneath the artists’ names there were words like *neoclassical* and injunctions to look carefully at the detail in the textiles, the play of light in water or a particular palette -- and below that, separated by a gaily twisted line, were listed the names of bequestors, estates and foundations and private collections. Sometimes they came with the stories of their acquisition -- purchased at auction and shipped from here to there, found among the spoils of a local dispute, painted at the request of a local baron for the birthday of his youngest son.

Prior to this he hadn’t bothered to engage with the idea that things like these, important things, museum things, might be found outside museums, and how many masterpieces there might be, missing Rembrandts or Van Goghs or whomevers, in libraries and drawing rooms. He’d kept pace with undiscovered things, new artists whose names Mikhi mentioned casually, with openings in brick buildings in better parts of town. But he hadn’t thought of auctions, of estate sales, of anyplace, really, where money wasn’t spent but layered, or maybe more specifically *traded*, changing form, energy into matter.

He wondered if he'd one day tell their children: this is when I became a collector. With your mother, at some stupid local museum in Connecticut.

He walked up behind Mikhi. The wood floor creaked and sagged, the sound somehow congruent with the room, taking its place between the stainedglass silences of the dead things on the walls and the soft *siff* of the ventilation system. He rubbed her shoulders. She had been cold; she'd been wrapping her arms around her middle and pulling at the sides of her sweater. Goosepimples all down her legs. She moved, a sideways shift on the balls of her feet, oddly inelegant. He tried to follow but he nearly ran into her when she stopped again to bend down and examine what appeared to be a cigarette lighter.

He asked, "You like this one?"

She shrugged, half-smiling, a look he knew to be the effort of trying to find something generous to say. "I don't not like it," she said. "Nothing here's really blowing my mind, you know?"

He said, "Yeah," although he wasn't sure.

She stepped away again.

He stayed to look at the lighter -- there were whorls carved into it with no particular pattern, just curves and lines and angles, layering, like the scales of an indeterminate fish. He wondered if it would still light. The description beside it said it was from the 1920s, part of the art deco movement in Japan. Its owner had been a collector, well-traveled, and had willed it to the museum. The description explicitly expressed the museum's gratitude.

Out in the gallery Mikhi was walking from piece to piece, not even stopping at

some, staying at others for what felt like too many heavy moments. He watched her until an elderly couple settled in next to him to look at the lighter and he felt ashamed for taking up so much time and space in front of something he hardly cared for. He left to find a place to sit.

He found a padded bench in front of a portrait, more or less life-sized, of a ballerina -- one leg spiked into the ground, the other scissored up behind her, and her torso seeming like a separate thing: arcing upward, bending over backward, arms bent and reached like birds' wings. Her tutu showered out from her waist in squared strokes of pink and white, her sinews smudged in charcoal and black. Her eyes, closed, thin lines in black separating fleshtone from fleshtone.

Mikhi found him, set beside him. "I like this one," she said.

"Walk me through that," he said.

"I'm sorry?"

"I mean, I like it, too -- but I look at it and I see a ballerina. But you probably see neoclassical this and textile that. What sort of things are you, I guess, *appreciating* here?"

She considered the canvas for a moment. Tilted her head. "I don't know. It's..." She sat, frowning at it.

After it became clear she wasn't going to answer, he said, "But you do like it."

Again, she nodded.

So he left her there, and she let him go without protest. Maybe without notice. He walked out through the Silk Road room, the 19th-century Dutch Masters room, the Wonders of the Classical World room, out into the lobby of the museum, which in its sudden transition felt like a world apart -- square white pillars and in the ceiling an

octagonal skylight that shone down of a reception desk, sitting alone amidst a floor of flecked marble, manned by a single college-aged girl who did a double take when she saw him approaching. Lingered on the second look. He smiled. She looked back down.

“The painting in there,” he said.

She laughed. “Which one?” Her hair was dyed white-blond beyond repairing, her eyes pale blue and wavering.

“I don’t know the name.”

She ran a thumb along her bottom lip; the nail was long, painted green, the right tone for the paleness of her skin. He wanted to ask her: have you ever thought about being a model? About posing for things that we’ll still be nailing to walls a hundred years from now?

“Do you know what it looked like?” She asked.

“It was a ballerina, doing... sort of the splits?” He posed his arms in an approximation of her pose.

“*Lady in Arabesque.*”

“That sounds right.”

“One of my favorites.”

“Mine too,” he said. “Now, this is kind of an unusual question --”

“Thank god. I was afraid you were going to ask me where the bathrooms were.”

He laughed. “That’s next.”

“Aw.” She affected a pout.

“But, say I wanted that painting, the *Arabesque* -- like, to have -- what sort of a donation facilitates that?”

Her mouth went horizontal, and he noticed how large the lobby was, how open, visible from every floor. “I don’t think we do that,” she finally said. “We maybe did an auction once, back in the eighties, but that’s because we were about to shut down and most of the people gave the paintings back anyway.”

““But you’re always looking for philanthropists, right? I want to be one. I do. And I know there are different levels of membership, and each one comes with its own benefits -- I’m just wondering what kind of membership comes with... A painting, I guess? Is that making sense?”

“Kind of.”

“Kind of,” he repeated, chewing the words. “Well, money is... It’s partly an object, but it’s not really an object.”

“You can talk to the head of the museum’s foundation.”

“I’d like that.”

She pulled the phone out from underneath a magazine and punched in six numbers. She smiled while she waited, but it was different than before, patronizing and brief. When the other of the line picked up, she said that there was a gentleman that wanted to speak with them, and it was about donations, mostly, and it was hard to explain. And then she hung up, and she told him, “He’s coming down,” She told him after she hung up.

“Thanks.”

“No problem.” She went back to something at her desk.

“Oh, and --”

She looked back up.

“Can you tell me where the bathrooms are located?”

She half-laughed.

And if he loved Mikhi, and he was sure he did, it was for that reason -- because the other girls, the younger, badly painted ones, could only follow to a certain point before they forced themselves into retreat. Because they turned sour at the hint of a wrinkle, and Mikhi always faced it down.

He imagined her upstairs, cold, alone. He hoped the supervisor would be quick. By now he figured it unlikely that he would come away with the painting but he wanted to have made the effort, and to tell her that he'd made it, and to set her imagination running.

A man, thin, in plaid and khakis, came down the stairs at a half-jog. He offered his hand and Mark took it. “Kristen tells me you’re interested in donating,” he said.

“I want one of the paintings.”

“You *want* one.” He said the word like it didn’t quite fit in his mouth.

“Yes.”

“I’m afraid that’s not how the foundation operates.”

“Even if the -- donation, I guess -- were... A million? Multiple millions?”

Mark could see the man’s breath catch. “Well, we can certainly talk about your donation. I certainly don’t want to close any doors on you, but I also don’t want to present you with any false hopes. This would be something I’d have to run by the board, and the board tends to run traditional, if you’re following me. If you want to come up to my office we can discuss some other options.”

Upstairs, Mikhi poked her head out from the glass doors of the exhibit. She



cocked her head when she saw him, her face an implicit question, and then she started out from the exhibit, headed toward the stairs, down to him.

“Is that your wife?” Jerry asked. The girl behind the counter -- Kristen -- frowned harder, leaning forward into the magazine she was reading.

“I can go as high as three million,” he told Jerry.

Mikhi was already on the stairs, gliding down. She was now stepping on to the floor, reaching in her purse with one hand and keeping her sweater closed with the other.

“I can’t. I’m sorry that I can’t. But if I can just get some contact information, I can send you some information about membership, we’ve got some wonderful offers available --” He paused to nod in Mikhi’s direction as she slid behind Mark, laying a light hand on his shoulder -- “for a fraction of what you’re offering.”

“What are you offering?” Mikhi asked.

He shook his head.

Kristen looked up, looked back down. Reddening.

All of it, frozen for a moment, each of them looking at the other, until Mikhi said they needed to go.

Outside the sky looked like the charcoal drawing of a sky, the clouds charcoal drawings of clouds, done up and finished by someone who’d later had a crisis of conscience, decided *skies are not so simple*, added salmon and coral sunset colors.

She said, “You were trying to buy something?”

“No.”

“Was it for me?”

“For me.”

“Bullshit,” She said. They walked a while, then she added, “I’m not a whore.”

And how the conversation had gotten there was beyond him.

When they were almost at the car she whispered, “God damn it,” and he saw the bird still lying there, unmoved from the morning, tinted differently in the sunset.

“God damn it,” she repeated, and she scooped the bird up in her hand to walk it to a trash can.

On the road in front of them, red taillights, livid holes in the dark stacked one on the other. He pulled the car to a stop, settling both of them forward, breaking the quiet they’d established. Around them the reddening light pushed inward. He wondered if, at the end of the traffic jam, they’d find an accident, a T-Boned car not unlike his own, and a truck, and a man apologizing profusely. He felt briefly guilty. Like he’d spun an accident into reality on the strength and frequency of his morbid wanderings.

Mikhi looked up from her phone, and sighed, and looked back down. She began to tap out a text message.

“We’ll make it,” he said.

She ignored him.

There was silence, and then he asked, “Do you want to get married?”

She looked up. “To you?”

He let it go. Things went quiet again, for what felt like hours, before traffic began to move -- the red lights disappearing, the night taking over. “See?” he said. “We’ll make, it no problem.”

As they accelerated he searched the sides of the road for the ambulance, for the shattered car and the apologetic driver. He looked for broken glass and rising steam. The

road was clear; the shoulders, bare. No sign, no remainder, of anything.